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the contemporary teacher

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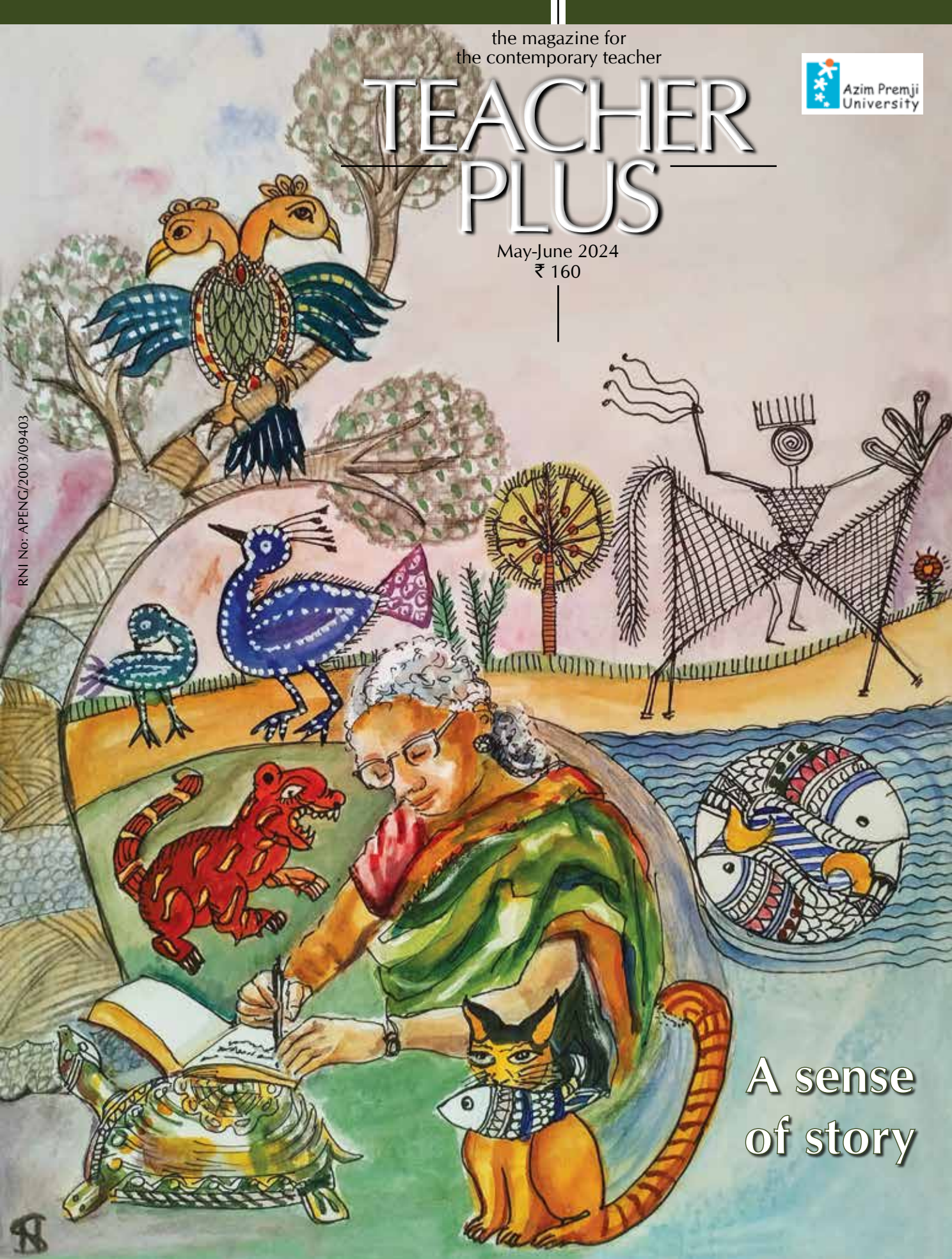

A sense of story

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For the love of a good story

Each time I close a good book I have a feeling that I've emerged from a deep immersion in a different world, a world that I have been granted access to through the power of words, a gift of the writer's powerful imagination. There's a slight sense of sadness at leaving that world, and there are times when I am reluctant to enter a new book for a while, preferring instead to wallow a little longer in the memory of the one I have just left. But then I look at the pile of unread books on my table, a placeholder peeking out of some, and I know there are other worlds to discover, other thoughts to spark new mind-travels. And of course, I know that the stories, once taken in, will constantly swirl within me, bumping into others that I've consumed, and sometimes mixing and re-emerging in unexpectedly joyful, or even confusing ways.

I cannot imagine my world without stories and books. From the public libraries of my childhood with their rows of severely bound volumes that held surprisingly summery tales, to the Kindle on my table holding scores of titles, books have been a constant in an otherwise unpredictable and often overwhelming world. As many of the contributors to this issue have noted, books have offered an escape, a refuge, a source of wisdom, and vicarious experience; they have given me answers to questions I've not known yet to ask, and windows to other ways of seeing the world.

It seems particularly fitting that this last issue of the printed version of *Teacher Plus* is about stories – in books, primarily, but also to be found in other places and in other forms. We've been able to bring a diverse group of writers – some longstanding contributors and others gracing our pages for the first time – to talk about stories. How to read and re-read them, bring them to life through illustration, draw from them sustenance, comfort and meaning, and perhaps even to create our own. Some ask how stories can be told through poetry, while others urge us to find knowledge in stories and interact with it in ways that can inform and clarify our responses to the world.

Every summer, *Teacher Plus* has been putting together a special double issue focusing on one curricular area, but this issue is a bit of a departure. While

the teacher of language and literature might find it of particular interest, we hope others will find something to take away as well, in terms of how a love of reading and books can fuel learning in all subjects.

Also, just as the book has found its way into other media – into e-readers, onto audio platforms, and metamorphosed into film and television, the stories we tell in *Teacher Plus* too will find their way into your computers and tablets and mobile phones. Not diminished, but different. I cannot deny that there is some sadness at bidding goodbye to the smell and feel of the printed page, and I understand that there will be many among our readers who feel a bit betrayed that they will not receive the package in the mail. We've received so many expressions of dismay, but also encouragement — some of which we share with you here. So sure, we will lose the paper and the ink, but we will not lose the spirit that makes *Teacher Plus* what it is. We hope that many of you will stay with us, and journey with us, as we move into this new *avatar* and continue to share your stories with *Teacher Plus*.

Tears and hope: what our contributors say

Anuradha C – Good decision to go completely online, changing with the times.

Ramya Sriram – I think going online is quite exciting and might see your readership expand to new audiences.

Neerja Singh – It makes business sense to go digital... saves on cost, is in line with climate sensitivity... the magazine reaches farther out and updates are easier. However, *Teacher Plus* should be available in both forms, digital as well as physical. India, in particular, has diverse demographics and about 51.3 per cent still don't have reliable access to the internet.

Neeraja Raghavan – I am heartbroken. How very sad!

Ratnesh Mathur – New ways lead to new opportunities.

Lakshmi Karunakaran – It's proven that attention span on long articles is pretty low online. Especially, technical ones. Plus many readers might be those who don't want to read online. I am pretty upset with all those who think everything can be online – and even worse on AI these days!

Aditi Tandon – I suppose this is inevitable with the changes in the publishing process and how (and where) people read these days.

Meena Sriram – As the world has already become part of a digital universe, it is only right that Teacher plus also transitions. Young teachers are more likely to read on their phones than in libraries.

Jane Sahi – Yes, sad but I am sure the digital version will open other possibilities and make it more sustainable. Look forward to keeping in touch and so appreciate the work done over many years and the significant contribution of *Teacher Plus* in building a community of learners among teachers.

Lakshmi Mitter – Yes, I definitely support the idea. I have grown used to the soft copy subscription. It is a lot more convenient especially because I can easily search for useful articles even from past issues.

Mini Krishnan – *Teacher Plus* is a magazine I have admired. I have so many old copies of it. *Teacher Plus* is one of the last of its kind. I am really sorry to hear that it is moving on-line. It is just not the same, is it?

Nabanita Deshmukh – I want to express my sadness on seeing the halt of the *Teacher Plus* print copies. Although digital copies are useful, the print magazines have other benefits, where pages can be touched and smelt, and magazines could be carried during travels or brought to bed for leisure reading.

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Goodbye to the old, hello to the new

As we come to the end of a fruitful 35 years with the print edition, *Teacher Plus* would like to thank all its subscribers and contributors. And even as we say **goodbye to the print magazine**, we would like to welcome all of you to an enhanced version of the **magazine in the digital format from July 2024**. All existing print subscribers of Teacher Plus will be moved to the digital version of the magazine. Please note that we are unable to entertain requests for cancellation of subscriptions. Do **update** your **email ids** and **phone nos.** to ensure a smooth transition.

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Cover: A sense of story

Sarada Natarajan teaches history and art history at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Illustrating for *Teacher Plus* gives her an opportunity to combine her various interests – old-fashioned brush and pigment painting, the history of art, art pedagogy for children, the enchanted world of nature and a quest for the outlandish.
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THE LIFELONG LEARNER: LITERATURE HELPS US TO...

BECOME ARMCHAIR DETECTIVES

ESCAPE INTO CHARACTERS

BUILD FANTASIES

FIND OURSELVES IN DIFFERENT WAYS

MAKE NEW FRIENDS

FEEL LESS ALONE

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The magic of sharing stories

Menaka Raman
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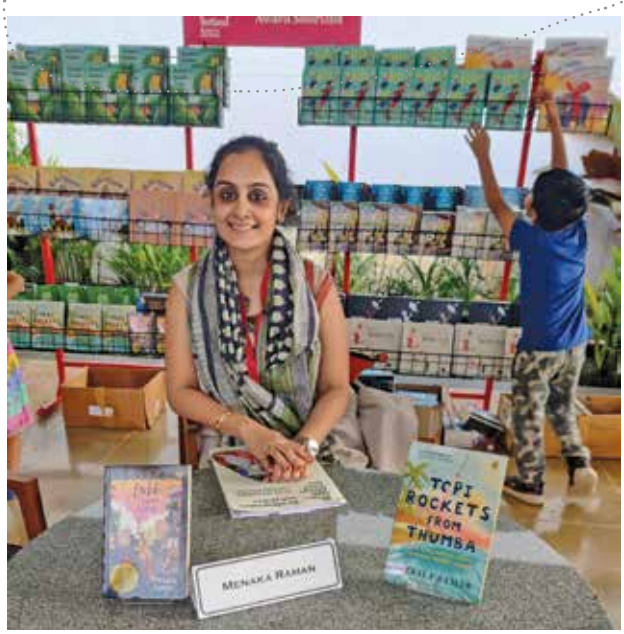
I'm often asked which part of the book creation process I love the best. While there's nothing sweeter than a 'yes' from an editor you've sent a book proposal to, and seeing the first sketches of characters you've created is always thrilling, and holding author copies is a high that never gets old, if I'm really honest, the best bit about making books for me is when I get to share them with my readers through school and library visits.

I suppose my reason for choosing this is quite selfish. After all, it's only when I read to a live audience of children that I get to experience first-hand if my book 'works' or not. Did that joke I was so proud of coming up with, land the way I hoped it would? What about that little moment I added to a scene during the nth rewrite – do they like it? What do they think about *this* character's dialogue *here*?

And with children, one always gets the unvarnished truth. Because they – unlike adults who have learned to sit through things with a polite smile on their faces – reveal exactly what they're feeling. Sometimes you get the reactions you hoped for – giggles or gasps of surprise – and sometimes, it's crickets.

But whatever the reaction, it's always genuine and honest.

I've been writing children's books for almost six years now, and have had the immense privilege and joy of reading from these books to young people in a range of settings – from government and affordable private schools to international schools, from community run libraries to book clubs and at literature festivals. Often, when schools extend an invitation, it is in the belief that the children will 'learn' something from



Photos courtesy: Menaka Raman

our visit. Usually, I am asked to stress upon the importance of reading, how to become a better writer (something even I'm trying to learn!) or the role of reading in writing. And while I can't promise that they will learn these things – or anything really – I know that I always leave sessions having gleaned something new: about how young people see the world, their fears and hopes, and the role that books play in their lives.

In a recent social media post, one of my favourite authors, Kate Di Camillo wrote, 'Writing books is done by humans for humans. It is a way for us to connect,' and I cannot agree more. My books have become a way of connecting with other people, many of whom I will never meet. But the ones I do get to meet? The experience is nothing short of delightful.

Having written across formats – picture books, to chapter books, to novels – I'm lucky that I get to meet children across age groups through my writing. They each bring something different to our time together.

The youngest children I've discovered are able to suspend belief and wholly accept absurdity. In my book *Lenin's Guests* illustrated by Kalp Sanghvi (Pratham Books), a young boy is called upon by his uncle to look after some friends who are travelling through Lenin's hometown. When children discover that Lenin's afternoon guests are in fact a praying mantis and a camel, there is always a ripple of utter joy through the room. Never disbelief. Never cynicism. Not once has a child said, 'Hey! That's not possible!'

Instead they laugh and go along with it, eager to know what happens next.

Of course, some of this unbridled acceptance fades as children get older and more aware of the world around them and its ways of working. They like to challenge things and question you. Primary students are a different kettle of fish. They're eager to share with you what *they* know, and it's always fun to see them jostle one another to answer the questions I ask them about ISRO and space research during sessions with books like *Topi Rockets from Tumba* illustrated by Annada Menon (Puffin) and *How to Reach Mars and Other Impossible Things* illustrated by Rajiv Eipe (Puffin). After reading from the latter at a school in Bengaluru, a 10-year-old shyly asked me if he could share what he knew about the 'slingshot' manoeuvre. When I agreed, he went on to give an explanation that was so concise and correct that I jokingly suggested he be a research assistant for my next book. He sought me out later and shared his mother's email id with me, instructing me to write to her when I wanted him to get started on work.

Today's children don't lack confidence, nor do they lack access to information. When I asked a group of students who they went to when they wanted a question answered, instead of the usual 'mum' and 'dad' I was expecting, many piped up that it was Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, Alexa, and one even said ChatGPT! But the responses led to a lovely conversation about trusted sources of information, fake news and how they could double check the information they were being presented. These were eight-year-olds, mind you.

As any teacher reading this knows, some of the hardest children to reach are middle and high schoolers. Some of them are suspicious of adults, others are convinced you're a relic from a bygone time (and to be fair, at 14, a 43-year-old is indeed a species on the brink of extinction), and some are so preoccupied with their exams and studies and extracurricular activities, an author is quite low down on their list of priorities. I always try to engage them by talking about the things I know my teenage children are into – multi-player video games, SnapChat filters and characters from manga (a form of Japanese graphic novels and comic books). A 43-year-old who knows about

Tony Tony Chopper (a character in manga comics) can't be *all* that bad.

It's only in the last couple of years or so that I've had a chance to interact with this age group as my novel *Loki Takes Guard* (Speaking Cub) was a pandemic book and came out during the lockdown.

One of my first outings with *Loki* was to a residential school in Indore. I'll admit I was a little apprehensive before the event. The book is about an 11-year-old cricket crazy girl in Chennai who wants to play for her local team. What would readers living in Madhya Pradesh make of this story set in a very particular milieu that was literally and figuratively miles and miles away from their own lived reality?

But as I spoke to them, I was reminded of something that I often tell children without thinking twice – that certain experiences and stories are universal and they strike a chord with us. That Saturday afternoon my own words really hit home as girls and boys alike asked me question after question: "How can I convince my parents to let me have a chance to go after my own dreams?" "How can I make my grandmother my ally? She's so strict and conservative!" "Why was Loki's father so silent throughout the book? Why didn't he have any opinions on anything?" Later that day, some of the students sought me out and spoke to me of being allies for one another when their families were not the most supportive, and their attempts to form clubs and spaces that were gender and choice inclusive.

The same book when shared with high schoolers in Bengaluru received a very different reaction. The majority of the children believed that listening to one's parents was the 'right' thing to do. They genuinely seemed convinced that their parents knew exactly what was right for them and there was no need to rebel. It was their duty to make them happy. I left the Bengaluru session thinking 'Hmm, what's going to happen to these kids' and left the Indore session thinking 'These kids are going to be alright.'

It's a thought that echoed in my head a year later when I read *I Love Me* illustrated by Ekta Bharti (Pratham Books) to children at a free community library in Bengaluru. The children, many of whom were from migrant families, opened up about being the new kid, their anxieties around making friends in a new place and how it was hard to put themselves out there and face rejection. It was wonderful seeing how the children gave each other suggestions on how to approach someone, and what they might say to become friends. They didn't hesitate to challenge one another either. When one of the young boys pointed at the main character Rubina and said, "But who will make friends with this girl! Look at what she's wearing. It's too short!" I paused wondering how I might respond to this statement. Before I could articulate my response, another boy piped up and said that what one wore was their choice "My body, my choice" he summed up neatly. "What right do we have to say that her dress is too short?" he questioned.

It's honestly these conversations that keep me writing alone at my desk. That very idea that something I write might be read by or to a young person and play a tiny role in shaping how they see the world is precious. As Kate di Camillo said, books really are about connections.

TP

Picture books: bringing together the world and the word

Thejaswi Shivanand
is a library educator at Champaca Children's Library, Bengaluru. He works with library-focussed organizations across India to support the growth of communities of readers. He is grateful to Jane Sahi and Usha Mukunda for many conversations over the years on the topic of this article. He can be reached at thejaswi.champaca@gmail.com.

In the picture book *Pishi and Me*[1], the central character is a child who loves to go on walks with his aunt. The world of the child comes alive in many ways in the book from the space the child occupies at that point in their life. The height of the child, for instance – looking up, looking down, looking at an angle – shows the way children orient themselves in the direction of the person, object, or view of the world they are engaging with in that moment in time (Figure 1). The child points, identifies, relates, abstracts the world of daily experience and relationships. In Freire's terms[2], the child is "reading the world" long before beginning to "read the word". However, significant adults in a child's life often restrict their understanding of reading to decoding and reading text. An expanded view of literacy and reading is essential to sensitively approach the question of a child learning to engage with text and the role picture books play in that context.

Photos courtesy: Thejaswi Shivanand

Figure 1: Illustration from Pishi & Me (2018) showing a child's perspective of the world.

Picture books can play a critical role in bridging the visual world of the child, brilliantly captured by the illustrator Rajiv Eipe in *Pishi and Me*, to a new world of symbolic representation in text. In this article, we

will explore some strategies and features of picture books that support their role in bringing the world and the word together.

Reading expanded

In an insightful speech[3] to a group of teachers, the Swiss literacy researcher, Denise Von Stockar presented an accessible view of reading. The arguments revolve around the multiple angles in which the act of reading involves the world of the child. Reading is listening – the child listens to lullabies, songs, and stories much before they begin reading text. Introduction to language happens at a very early stage as opposed to familiarity with print and script. Reading is seeing – the child can visually process the world, recognize shapes and forms, orient and point to familiar objects, corners, people – much before they begin reading text. Reading is speaking – the child learns at a very early age to recognize and associate specific sounds with specific features of the world around them. In this process, the child learns the existence of discrete words, each of which are abstract yet specific associations of objects and sounds.

This is when a child can be introduced to board books with durable pages and bold images with a focus point on each page. The child can recognize and point to familiar features in the book or prompt the adult as only a child can to provide the appropriate sound associations for the visual cues in the book. The tactile experience of holding a book, turning the pages, sometimes even chewing on the book, and throwing it around, makes engagement with the book a multimodal experience.

As the child grows older, they also learn to express internal states of being and emotion in their simplest word forms. Older children are also able to share narrative in speech and can share wild or staid stories of their own imagination. Picture books with simple, linear, or complex narratives, with or without words, can be introduced to children to familiarize them with the orientation of the book, pictures, and directionality of print[4] (which is different depending on the language), even if they are not yet familiar with the myriad complexities surrounding decoding the symbolic richness in script. However, the engagement with picture books is not only related to reading the script but also to the child expressing internal states of meaning-making and emotional landscapes while narrating the sequence of images. Picture books are rich sources of narrative building with complex, multiple layers of storytelling happening in the images itself that a child can decode without decoding the script also present on the page.

Reading is writing – the earliest forms of expression other than speech are often scribbles and doodles that a child makes on sand, mud, paper using various available instruments ranging from sticks, to pencils, to crayons. This is not the script used to symbolize individual alphasyllables, or logographs, or words, but more whole worlds of visual storytelling that bring in world building or narrative drama in one fell swoop.

In a print-rich environment with many easily accessible picture books, whether at home or in early preschools or later in schools, picture book-rich rooms and libraries can play a significant role in encouraging emergent literacy. Here, the availability of print in the environment orients the child to develop familiarity with the format of printed books, the conventions around orienting and reading narratives in pictures, and inevitably, inexorably towards script-specific concepts of words and their symbolic subunits, most familiarly letters in the Indian context.

Picture books expanded

Children actively engage with their world and explore picture books as they do the rest of the world. How do picture books lend themselves to rich exploration by children?

Picture books written for children have a storied history that dates to the late 18th and early 19th century in Europe, evolving and morphing into currently recognizable forms by the early 20th century. Early books were mostly pop-up or similar novelty books, or illustrated books with images supporting the text, while the picture books of today are defined by the equal and often divided partnership between text and illustration in parallel storytelling. The blend between text and image creates a magical world that presents itself in simple or complex, often deep ways where children find their way around discovering new corners or finding familiar spots. The idea of picture books acting as 'windows', 'mirrors', and 'sliding doors' is not a new one.[5]

How do these opportunities for windows and mirrors, which offer us glimpses to the world-building in the child, get reflected in the form of the picture book? As discussed in the example that opened this article, *Pishi and Me*, a child is often the central character in a picture book with the illustrations often presenting the story from the child's perspective. Another excellent example is the boy observing ants in *Busy Ants* by

Pulak Biswas[6] (Figure 2). However, the child need not be the focus of perspective but can occupy other frames of action as in *Where's that Cat?*[7] by Manjula Padmanabhan, where the moving autorickshaw guides the reader through the narrative frame in the illustration, or movement of the rabbit in Eric Rohmann's *The Flight of the Rabbit*[8]. Sometimes, pages densely populated with illustrations, for instance, intended to show a diverse city in Deepa Balsavar's *Nani's Walk to the Park*[9], can be navigated with a clearly identifiable character such as the grandmother in a distinctive ajrakh sari on each page guiding movement across the page (Figure 3). These devices help in drawing the child's attention across the page and to the next, carrying the story forward.

Figure 2: Frame from Busy Ants (1987) illustrating a child's involvement with their world.

Figure 3: Find nani in an ajrakh sari in this busy marketplace (Nani's Walk in the Park, 2018)

Humour in the form of slapstick action often finds a space for engagement in picture books. The characters in Anushka Ravishankar's *Catch That Crocodile*[10], another classic illustrated by Pulak Biswas, plays with the placement, size and movement of the text along with incongruous movements by characters, outsized objects like giant syringes and visually rich, cinematic action sequences (Figure 4 a and b). Ashok Rajagopalan's *Gajapati Kulapati*[11] series is a great favourite with children due to the extra dose of action experienced by the central character, an elephant. Animal characters figure significantly in many picture books.

Figure 4 a: Doctor Dutta attempting to tranquelize the crocodile.

Figure 4 b: Wrestler Bhayanak Singh attempting to subdue the crocodile (Catch that Crocodile 1999)

A steady pace in the story generated through momentum is important in sustaining engagement from the child. Text can also be used effectively in this case. *Sameer's House*[12] uses repetitive, cumulative, pyramid-like build-up of text in each successive page for excellent engagement in activities such as read alouds as children would get into repeating familiar text build rhythmically and systematically (Figure 5). This clever design in the book uses the potential for such repetition to reinforce ideas on scale in geography and astronomy. A placeholder of Sameer's House is also used to indicate location in the illustrations as the scale of space grows larger with progessive pages. A

similar pattern can be seen in several books including *The Sea in a Bucket*[13].

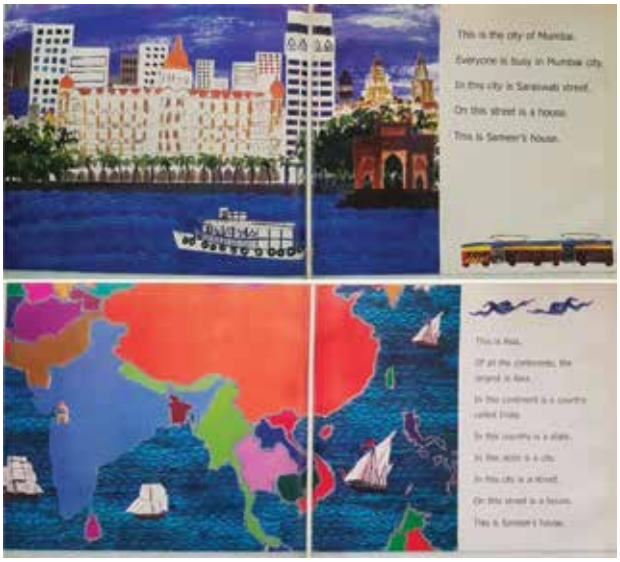


Figure 5: Pages from Sameer's House (2006) showing the sequential build-up in the interplay of text and illustrations to engage children.

While examples suggested earlier appear to focus on entertaining characters or storylines, or clever design principles, engagement through effective storytelling can bring in further emotional connect, self-reflection ('mirror') and new learning ('window'). A book can be a window for some, a mirror for others, a mix of both for some – depending on the individual contexts and conditioning of the children. A girl from the Bakarwal community may find fictional Sadiq's desire to stitch in *Sadiq wants to Stitch*[14] as a relatable tale, while a boy from the same community might find it a new experience. A child where stitching is part of the community, but from a different geography might find Sadiq's story both a mirror to their way of life and a window to a new community and landscape.

Picture books hold death, loss, gender, and disability easily among their pages in a manner where children can relate to as they try to do in their day when they encounter these facts of life and living. *Gone Grandmother*[15] by Chatura Rao and Krishna Bala Shenoi, explores a child's meaning-making process of losing her grandparent in a gentle, humorous manner and yet located firmly in the child's world as shown by the ideas that spring out of her in the illustrations (Figure 6). Allen Say's *Emma's Rug*[16] explores a child's deep attachment to objects in their world and the impact of loss on their emotional engagement with the world and the illustrations find a way to convincingly convey Emma's emotions. Raviraj Shetty and Deepa Balsavar's *Our Library*[17] finds a welcoming space for a diverse group of disabled children within a library where there is a careful attempt in depicting disability with accuracy, care, and love.

Figure 6: Nina making sense of losing her grandmother (Gone Grandmother, 2016).

Wordless picture books always find a special place in children's libraries as they pave the way to open fantasy and reality alike, in ways that text can sometimes constrain. *Footpath Flowers*[18] has a young child who goes on a walk with the parent, gathers flowers and shares love with everyone she connects with on the walk (Figure 7). Aaron Becker's fantasy *Journey*[19] has two children embark on an adventure in a world created and powered by a red crayon. In each of these cases, the storytelling is entirely done by illustrations, but there is an underlying script that keeps the story going, which a child can tap as the cleverly designed books guide them in linear and non-linear ways to old haunts and new crannies.

Figure 7: A child sharing flowers with a dead sparrow and a sleeping man in Footpath Flowers (2016).

Reading journeys as a cultural enterprise

Readers are not created in a world only filled with books. Readers are nurtured by communities of other readers. Significant adults such as grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, older siblings, and cousins, tell stories and sing lullabies when children are young.

Other adults, more of the above plus educators in classrooms and libraries, other mentors, are important in different stages of the child's life and can all play a role in bringing picture books to children.

Since picture books are designed to engage the child in the act of reading in a complex way, the adults in their life can help in curation, reading aloud, reading together, gamification, sharing their responses and thoughts, asking questions and offering a space to listen to responses to books, reading, and meaning-making around books. While for several children picture books can act as refuges from the complexities of the world, a caring adult who shares in the joy of reading can always make the refuge less confusing and more accepting with their presence. Communities of readers grow as many young readers experience their individual reading journeys into adulthood, ready to nurture the next generation of readers to bring them to picture books and other books as they grow older.

In India, we must address the question of creating communities of readers since reading for pleasure or meaning making, either individually or with adults, is not a culturally widespread activity due to historical and sociological reasons. Access to books for a vast population, which continues to be underserved, is necessary, even as the number, diversity, and quality of picture books is slowly growing across the country. Also, picture books are often expensive, and while efforts have been in place for several years to reduce the price of books, parents do not easily buy them for children even when priced low. A wide network of libraries across the country with spaces and collections for children can fill this gap as well as provide the space and programmes for making reading for pleasure, learning, and life skills a cultural enterprise reaching all than where it is currently.

Are picture books the future?

Picture books are for all ages, adults and children alike enjoy them. In this article, we briefly foray into the many ways of children reading the world and the word through the picture book. An increasingly digital world with screen time occupying significantly more time in young children's lives with hassled adults handing over cell phones to calm children, where YouTube has penetrated remote parts of the country on hand-held devices even before the first picture books, what is the future of picture books?

Creators of picture books are essentially storytellers, so long as there are creators for this basic human trait, there will be picture books. So long as people participate in economic activities around sustaining the creation of picture books, they will continue to exist. And so long as there are communities of readers who love and nurture reading, picture books will continue to be read and be around. And so long as human beings engage with the physical world around them and value reading the word, we will find a space for picture books in their lives. In an increasingly digital world, communities of readers are coming together around physical and mobile libraries and picture books continue to weave their magic in bringing up children to relate and process the complexities of the world around them and faraway.

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Stories hidden within stories

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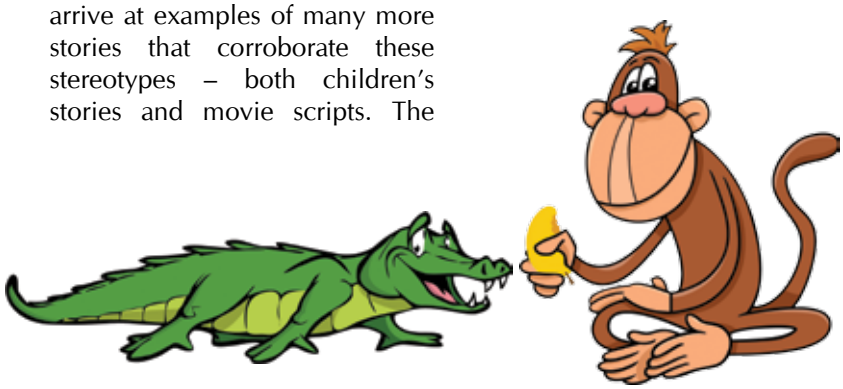
There was once a young, cheerful child. She loved skipping and climbing up monkey-bars. The only thing she liked more than playing in the park were toffees and candies! One evening, she came home to a large jar of toffees sitting unattended on the table. It was a clear glass spherical jar with a small mouth, but big enough for the girl to put her little fist in and grab all the toffees she could. And that is exactly what she did! Climbing on to a chair, she reached for the jar and put her hand in, excited at this unexpected loot! Grabbing on to all the toffees she could, she attempted to pull her hand out and found herself stuck. She tugged and pulled, to no avail. Quickly panicking, she began to weep. Her mother came out hearing this and chuckled gently on seeing the scene. She comforted the little girl and asked that she let go off some of the toffees she was clutching on to. The little girl's hand would still not come out of the jar. She let go of a few more toffees until there were only two in her fist. Now, the little girl's hand, without all those toffees swelling it up, slid out easily. Handing over one toffee to her mother and peeling open one for herself, they both enjoyed the toffees. The little girl had learnt her lesson and was no longer greedy for more than she could have!

My mother had narrated this story to me as a 6-7 year old, tactfully just around when we had been invited over by our neighbours for evening tea. Dressed in clean clothes, I was on my best behaviour as I seated myself next to mum. Aunty brought out a plate piled up with *soan-papadi*, placed it on the teapoy in front of me and went in for more. I immediately leaned in to help myself! My mum tugged at me and reminded me of the toffee-girl story. I whispered to her, I'd take only one! My mum tugged again and reminded me how the girl got into trouble for taking the toffee without being offered. I was to wait for the host to come back out,

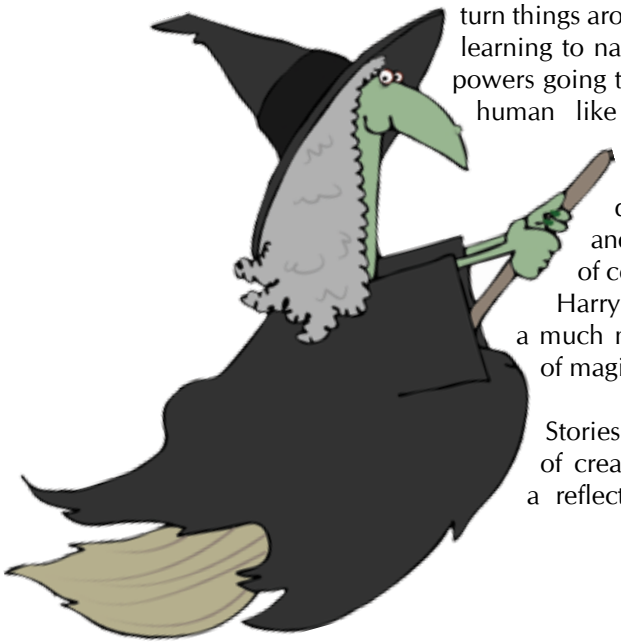
offer the sweets and then politely take only one or two at most.

That story had more for me to learn from than the obvious. It was a gentle nudge in teaching me etiquette and polite ways of being in society. This wasn't a quick lesson; it'd take several stories to train one in ways of understanding and interacting with the world. Humans and storytelling may share an almost equal timeline of existence. For as long as we have been able to communicate, we have tried to handover and carry down stories of our times – past, present, and future. *"Story is an important way to establish the individual and cultural self"* (Akar Vural, 2014). Stories have been how we imparted integral wisdom of the living and the dead, of medicine and magic, of laws and chaos, of observations and imaginations, of wars and love, of faith and myths. Every story has a few key literary elements – characters (who it is about), themes (what it is about), setting (where and when it is taking place), plot (what is going wrong, how it is made right). These form the skeletal frame of the story over which all other details are built. Intertwined in these details come hidden messages for the reader, absorbed, often, unintentionally. A story about an unlikely relationship between a crocodile and a monkey that feeds him sweet mangoes could just be about loyalty and betrayal in friendship. And yet, it is a lot more than that. Most retellings of the famous *Panchatantra* tale go something like this – A monkey and crocodile become friends, with the monkey dropping down sweet fruits to the crocodile. One day, the crocodile carries home a few fruits for his wife who wonders how sweet the monkey's heart must be from eating all these sweet fruits and asks her husband to bring home the monkey so she may taste the heart. The crocodile is heartbroken but wants to please his wife – the story goes on, with the crocodile finally getting fooled and the monkey breaking their friendship. Depending on which version of the story one encounters, the story goes beyond loyalty in friendship and quick wit. It also imparts the stereotype of the 'jealous' wife who wanted more attention from her husband (https://www.tell-a-tale.com/panchatantra-monkey-crocodile/), the 'greedy' and 'cunning' wife who tricked her husband into betraying his friend (https://byjus.com/kids-learning/panchatantra-stories-the-monkey-and-the-crocodile/), crocodiles as creatures that are evil, plotting, and untrustworthy (https://www.vedantu.com/stories/the-crocodile-and-the-monkey). It doesn't take much thinking to arrive at examples of many more stories that corroborate these stereotypes – both children's stories and movie scripts. The narratives of wives being envious and villainous are plentiful and so are narratives of the reptile world being cunning and vengeful. Myriad stories and myths combine the two as well, of vengeful women who turn into snakes, of vengeance seeking snakes turning into beautiful women to prey on unsuspecting men.

Stories carry within them hidden themes with unintended (or perhaps less explicit) lessons, values, and insights. In the language of pedagogy and schooling, a 'hidden curriculum' deals with tacit ways in which knowledge and behaviour get constructed, outside the usual course materials and formally scheduled lessons (McLaren, 1994). The stories we take to our children also carry an element of this hidden curriculum – unintended impressions of the world we inhabit. A case could however be made for the hidden curriculum not being so unintended/thoughtless. Quite often, hidden curricula within stories help maintain the status quo in society, help maintain prejudices and stereotypes – the story of witches for example. Most fables and tales



that speak of forests and humans may have a character of a witch – very often, a lone woman with magical prowess hidden away in the darkest part of the jungle; someone to be feared, kept away from; someone with curses on her finger tips; someone usually portrayed as being haggard, unkempt, wrinkly with sagging skin and old. A wizard on the other hand, is a male magician, with much the same powers and knowledge of potions and spells – but see how the vocabulary has changed? Curses to spells. A wizard isn't a haggard, unkempt one. A wizard is wise, is sought for wisdom in a time of need, a witch is sought to dispel a curse (most likely cast by her previously – think, *Beauty and the Beast*) or is often the antihero (think the Disney movie – *Tangled*). This plays well into the narrative of the actual history of lone women and medicine women who were feared and misunderstood for they did not fall into the prototype of a woman – one seeking family, serving the dominant sex. 'Witch-hunts' were true of our history and in a redefined way, continue to exist. And yet, there are the alternatives to this biased narrative. 'Witches' are seeing a comeback with a renewed connotation. Hayao Miyazaki from the well-known and loved Ghibli studios came out with *Kiki's Delivery Service*' in 1989, a touching story of a 13-year old witch seeking her purpose and role in the world as a witch – a world in which Miyazaki did not write witches as evil or uncommon, a world where witches lived amidst the common folk, looked and spoke much like them, even were troubled by self-esteem and self-doubt... all this while flying atop a broom! In more recent literature, we have Rachael Griffin's book *The Nature of Witches*, published in 2021. The premise of the story being of witches and humans coexisting, with the witches controlling the climate that is quickly getting out of hand owing to human actions. Only one witch may be able to turn things around and she is still learning to navigate her magical powers going through very much human like challenges as a teenager – friendship, self-doubt, courage, and love. And then of course you have the Harry Potter series with a much more layered view of magic and witchcraft.



Stories hold the potential of creating a mirage and a reflection of the world we find ourselves in. It becomes crucial to look for the stories within stories – stories of gendered roles, of political ideologies, of class prejudices, of power dynamics, of beauty and body images, of race and ethnicity, of kinship and separation with the natural world. Within the scope of this article, we have only dipped ankle-deep in our exploration of hidden stories of gendered roles and perspectives of our lived and imagined worlds. Taking a pause here, with an invitation to keep our ears and eyes open to read between and within the lines, question the play of characters, and re-imagine stories where necessary.

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Learning difference: through the lens of stories

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I felt the power of stories long before I started academic research on how stories and narratives connect with and shape social and cultural worlds – our lives, tastes, aspirations, anxieties, friendships, likes, and dislikes. Like many others, I have forgotten much of what I was taught during my school days. However, certain stories and poems have stayed with me. For instance, we had a poem by William Wordsworth titled "We Are Seven" in middle school. It was about a little girl who insisted "We are seven", even though two of her siblings, from a family of seven brothers and sisters, were dead. The poem was set in the British countryside, and most of the details escaped me. However, I identified with the girl – that is precisely how I would count my siblings even if one of them were gone. It spoke to me about attachment, love, and loss. Many years later, after the loss of two of my siblings, this poem would return to me at unexpected moments. Post-colonial studies tell us about English literature's colonial affiliations and the racist, Anglocentric worldview implicit in it. It has trained us to look at canonical texts critically and historically. Critical theory has alerted us to the hidden ideological underpinnings of dominant narratives. At the same time, we know that it is difficult to fix the meaning of texts; children make sense by pulling alien texts into their contexts – identifying, questioning, and sometimes subverting dominant interpretations.

The problem arises when children's imaginations are regulated, directing them to read in unilinear, pre-determined ways. Sadly, our dominant education system often demands such an uncritical, homogenizing approach. In my childhood, as soon as I learnt reading (initially in my mother tongue Odia; English would come later) I devoured books in all shapes and forms. Textbooks formed a small part of my readings. The knowledge that I gained from the school curriculum was impacted by the books I read outside of the curriculum. There were times when my teachers and parents would view some of my readings with suspicion; perhaps they found those to be a bit inappropriate for my age! But I am glad I grew up in a fairly relaxed environment where everyone was happy if a child was reading and off their hands. As I started reading canonical texts in English (such as the poems of Wordsworth or abridged plays of Shakespeare), I would make sense by connecting them

with my immediate, local contexts. However, in high school and subsequently in college and university, I would gradually realize that only reading in expected ways fetched marks. This would lead me to be disinterested in my subjects and my grades would deteriorate.

Children's literature: combining delight with instruction

Several years later, as a student of cultural studies, I would look at texts as deeply embedded in structures of power. This is a bewildering idea, especially if applied to children's literature – an area viewed as fun, entertaining, and free from the burden of ideology. However, contemporary scholars of children's literature point to a different trajectory. From its very beginning in the mid 17th century, children's literature has carried the responsibility of teaching appropriate bourgeois values to children, combining delight with instruction. It is represented as an arena of innocence, mirroring the norms underpinning the idea of '"childhood" – purity, innocence, and transparency. Tracking the controversies around one of the most iconic representatives of innocence, *Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose writes that it plays out the fantasy of childhood that actually is an effect of adult desire.[1] Perry Nodelman has discussed how the producers of children's literature must make judgments about what to produce based not on what they believe will appeal to children but rather on what they believe adult consumers – parents, teachers, librarians, etc. – believe will appeal to children.[2] A fallout of such framing of children's literature has been the invisiblization of non-normative childhoods.

Below, I discuss how a story can serve as an effective pedagogic tool through a brief analysis of the Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) phenomenon. I then go on to reflect on the need to bring in more stories and narratives from the lives of children from marginalized backgrounds into our school curriculum and children's writing, in order to pave the way for a more democratic, inclusive system of education and society.

The Amar Chitra Katha: "The Route to Our Roots"

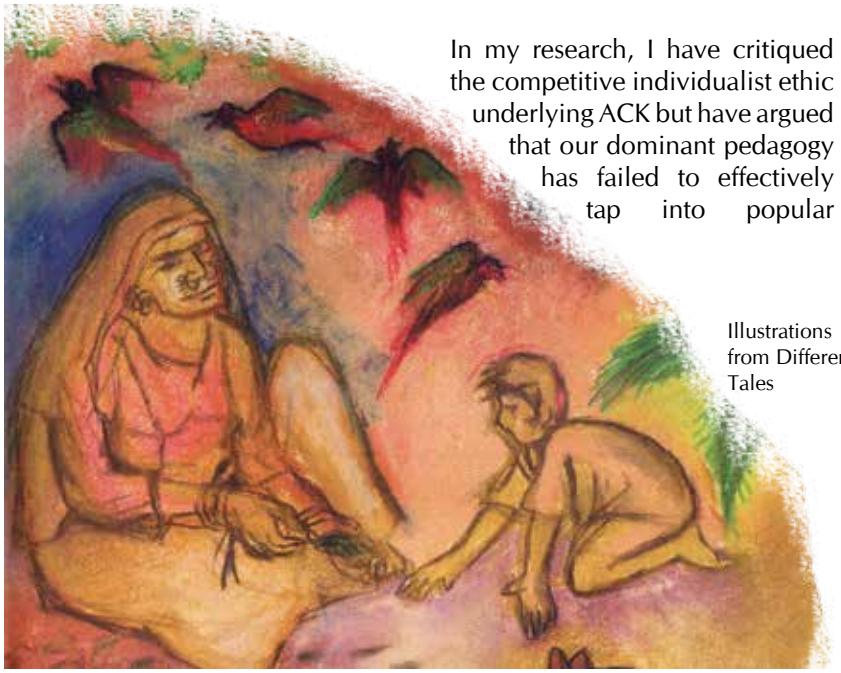
ACK, a series of comic books carrying tales from Indian mythology and history, was launched in 1967 by Anant Pai. Deeply troubled by what he perceived as the alienation of the Indian youth from their "roots",

Illustration: Sunil Chawdiker

Pai quit a secure job as a journalist at the *Times of India* to embark on this enterprise. In a market inundated by American comics, Pai faced considerable setbacks in the initial days, with the sales of the ACK titles dipping. Schools would not buy these books for their libraries because comics were widely viewed as frivolous reading material that would corrupt children's language and morality. There are inspiring accounts of Pai struggling to sell his books during those early days, peddling ACK titles at petrol-pump kiosks. The struggle would soon pay off, and the series would go on to make publishing history in India. Attractively produced, colourfully illustrated, and reasonably priced, the ACK issues would become integral parts of middle-class urban homes, valued as the kind of reading material essential for the proper upbringing of the child. Parents would have the issues carefully bound, and these bound volumes would serve as an encyclopaedia of Indian history and mythology not only for the children, but also for older members of the family. ACK can claim to have shaped the ideas of merit, perseverance, nation, and citizenship for generations of middle-class children growing up in the 70s and 80s. As I have discussed in one of my books, ACK's representation of mythological and historical figures served to legitimize two premises: a) India had an unbroken, singular Hindu past and b) these figures exemplified individual perseverance and heroism in the face of adversity, thus serving as role models for a competitive individualist ethic.[3] ACK's normative universe, albeit from the past, neatly tied up with the aspirations of a market-oriented middle class in India in the post Nehruvian era, impatient with welfarism. Furthermore, it glided over the divisions and hierarchies among people based on caste, class, community, and/or gender.

Story, history, and the present

ACK combined the comic format with Indian storytelling modes – the scroll, chitrakatha, murals, cinema posters, calendar art – to weave its narratives in innovative and attractive ways. Most important, it consciously distanced itself from the dates-and-facts approach of the school history textbook, dipping into popular history, beliefs, myths, and the common sense of people. It carefully sculpted protagonists who were indomitable yet realistically drawn and humanized, avoiding anything that might be construed as magic or miracle. So the Krishna of ACK is an ordinary child with extraordinary capabilities.



Illustrations from Different Tales

Sages (Chanakya, Dayananda, Vivekananda, Chinmayananda and many more) are not recluses but remain in the thick of socio-political ferments, urging their followers to draw upon their innate potential to overcome obstacles and achieve success (read against the backdrop of the critique of Nehruvian welfarism underlying the ACK, this ties up with an individualist discourse). The Indian born astronaut Kalpana Chawla, who lost her life in 2003, aboard the ill-fated space shuttle Columbia, is valorized; yet there's an underlying message that if women want true equality, they must eschew any demands derived from their historical marginalization based on gender. Paradoxically, Babasaheb Ambedkar, a rallying point for anti-caste politics and self-respect movements, is projected as a "model of excellence", validating the view that those who have been historically marginalized must aspire to meritorization of the self rather than to any form of affirmative action.

In my research, I have critiqued the competitive individualist ethic underlying ACK but have argued that our dominant pedagogy has failed to effectively tap into popular

visual cultures to construct more egalitarian histories and knowledge.

Different tales

I now shift to a set of stories very different from the ACK narratives. In the early 2000s, I was part of a project at the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, that entailed the collection and publication of stories from the experiences and life worlds of children from marginalized cultures and regional languages. Over a substantive period of research and interaction with writers, illustrators, and activists, we collected a set of about 20 stories that dealt with themes and contexts rarely addressed in children's literature. Written in Telugu and Malayalam originally, these stories were translated into English as well as Malayalam and Telugu respectively, and would eventually be published in a series titled *Different Tales*.

The idea of *Different Tales* emerged out of Anveshi's longstanding engagement with questions of education and marginalization, specifically a study on curricular transactions in 10 government schools in and around Hyderabad.[4] A majority of the children who attended these schools were from Dalit and other marginalized backgrounds. Many of the children balanced school with work; their sense of self was constituted by their contribution to familial survival and well-being. Yet, textbooks and classroom transactions were found to be disconnected from their lives. Measured against normative standards, these children appeared 'unsmart' and uneducable. Several studies, including the Anveshi study, demonstrate that such stereotyping and alienation at school adversely impacts the confidence of children, driving them to drop out of education.[5]

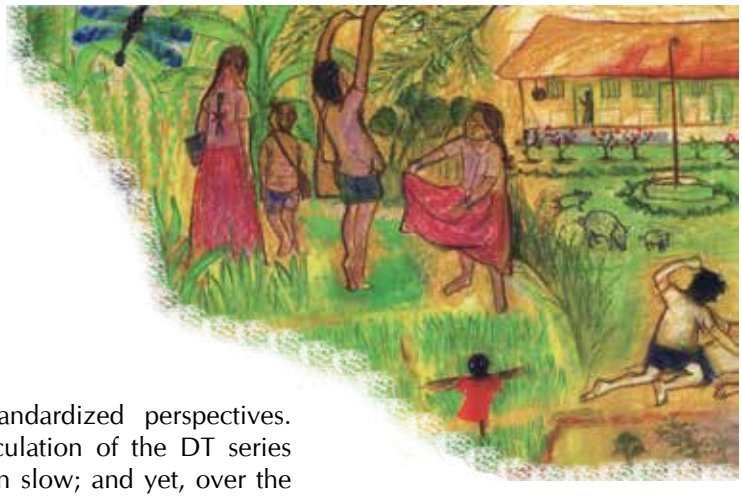
Most of the writers of the Different Tales stories are from Dalit and other minority communities, drawing on their childhood experiences to write their stories. The narratives depict the complex ways in which children negotiate and cope with their lives, drawing upon the resources and relationships within the community. *Braveheart Badeyya* (2008) by Gogu Shyamala, noted Dalit activist and writer from the Telangana region, is based on the childhood of a Dalit professor in a well-known university. This could have been a story of individual triumph, but remains deeply embedded in community contexts. Badeyya, the first one to go to school from his community is made to sit in the last row so that he does not 'pollute' other students. However, the focus quickly shifts to the nurturing relationship between him and his community, teaching him everyday skills and the strength to respond to caste-based injustice. *The Sackclothman* by Jayasree Kalathil is a tender portrayal of the growing friendship between young Anu and the local madman,

with a fetish for sackcloth. Anu's family is struggling to cope with the death of her sister; her mother lies in bed all day, and her father has taken to drinking daily. The sackclothman helps Anu to deal with grief unlike the others around her who look at her as an object of pity. Nuaiman's Textbook captures a Muslim child's bewilderment over not finding a single name from his community in his school textbook.[6]

Illustrations bring alive the lifeworlds of children – work, play, family, food cultures, and so on. In mainstream children's stories such as the ACK, the illustrations prop up the centrality of the protagonist and reflect the sociocultural worlds of middle-class upper caste children. The artists illustrating Different Tales, developed a visual language that drew on the visual repertoire surrounding children from non-middle-class contexts (posters, cinema, folk art, commercial hoardings, graffiti and so on) while connecting to their lives in meaningful, affirming ways. For instance, an image from the story *Textbook* shows the central figure trudging to school with a bag and umbrella, with no stereotypical mark that indicates that he is Muslim. Instead, it is only by exploring his landscape's details – mosque, school, grandmother rolling bidis, friends, and siblings – that the viewer makes assumptions about this figure. The local flavour of the buildings, the trees and plants in the picture, subtly suggest the central role of region in creating this boy's world.[7]

Spread stories, spread hope

There are no established channels of dissemination for reading material that deviate from standardized perspectives. The circulation of the DT series has been slow; and yet, over the years, it has been picked up by educators, NGOs, and grassroots organizations that look upon such stories as a much-needed supplement to standard textbooks. Eklavya, a non-profit, non-government organization known for its innovative educational programmes, has republished the complete set of DT books in English. It has also published Hindi translations of some of the books. Abhiruchi Prakashan has published four of the DT books in Kannada, with an added story called 'Every Day Ajji' by Du Saraswathi, writer, theatre person, and Dalit activist.



Stories such as the *Different Tales*, do travel and reach their audience, albeit slowly. There is an immense need for stories, poems, biographies that bring 'different' perspectives, mirroring the lives of children from diverse contexts, especially those who have been long excluded. As teachers and educationists, we must find ways of bringing such narratives into our classrooms, into the libraries and into the hands and hearts of children.

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It's all in the pictures

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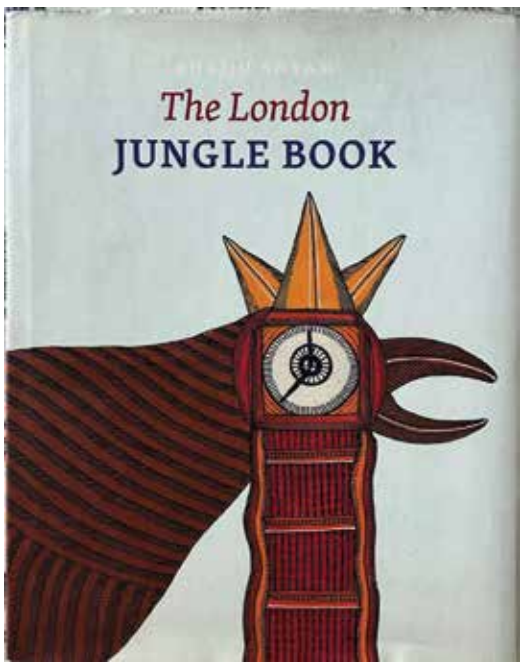
The first time I read folk stories I felt something was amiss. The characters were a bit different and there was no evil god mother or monster that had to be killed, and in some cases, there was no happily ever after either. Or at least there were no carriages that took off and no major battles won. I enjoyed this departure from (what I thought was) the obvious as I read different authors, almost never able to guess where the story was going and how it would end. This tryst with folk stories was sparked by an interest in understanding indigenous visual narratives. It was a constant to and fro between what the stories are and how they are represented.

It was the folk artist as the author and illustrator that I was most interested in, who brought their world of words and visuals together on a page. I often read these books multiple times, first a skim to get excited, the second time I read the words first and then observed the accompanying visuals, noticing how particular phrases were represented. And, often a third time, purely dedicated to appreciating the rich visuals, which felt as if they belonged in a museum.

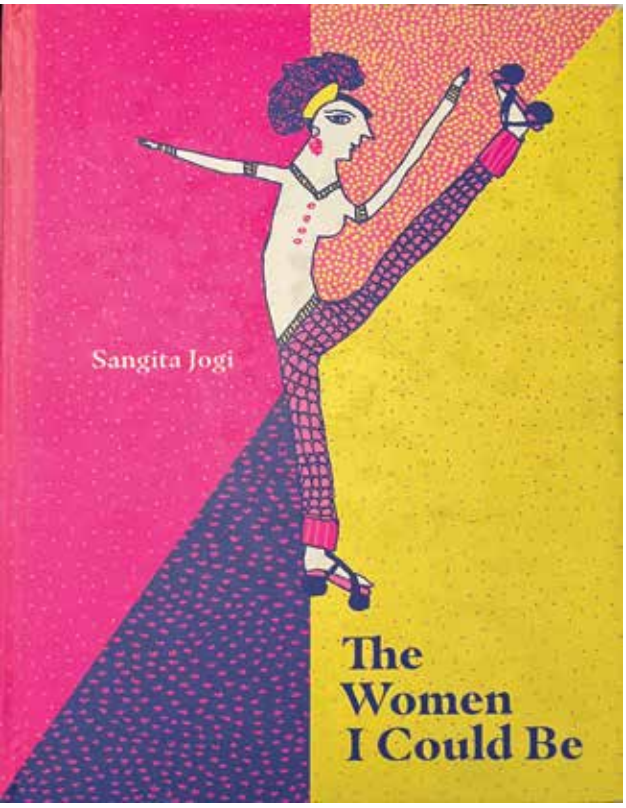
As a visual arts educator, these voices often enter my classroom in different formats. Bhajju Shyam's *London Jungle Book* is one of my favourites. Created as a response to his first trip to London, the book simultaneously introduces its readers to two worlds, literally and imaginatively. First, to London as experienced by the author, and second, to the author's own world, where he lives. Through juxtapositions and contrasts drawn between the London bus, a fox, the earthworms, and the underground trains, all



Photos courtesy: Siddhi Gupta

elements that exist in the real world, Bhajju creates a fantastical world that enchants its readers. In a classroom, this book becomes my way of encouraging students to observe their environments and life, to record their day-to-day and value their experiences. And above all, in engaging with Bhajju's unique perspective, the students are inspired to respect their own, and they feel empowered to tell their own stories.

Another book that I deeply admire, published by the same publisher, Tara Books, is Sangita Jogi's *The Women I Could Be*. Bright and energetic, Sangita's words and visuals make you dance and sing, travel and cook, laugh and fly. The narration is bold and spaced out, interspersed with intricate visuals that can keep you engaged for hours. In the classroom, this book becomes a great tool to question stereotypes and reflect on their understanding of roles in the world. Sangita's aspirations for herself become universal, collective, and shared as you unpack the pages with the class.



Bhuri Bai presents her life growing up as a visual narrative in Museum of Art and Photography's (MAP) online exhibit called 'My Life as an Artist'*. Simple yet evocative, the story doesn't exaggerate or create any suspense or get into the details of each episode. When shared in a classroom, the students are attracted to the unique visual sensibility. They are curious about the ways in which trees, animals, humans, and objects are visualized, especially the dots! Bhuri Bai belongs to an adivasi community called the Bhils, and dots are a part of their collective visual vocabulary. Instead of sharing Bhil paintings without any context, Bhuri Bai's narrative invites questions from the class, which leads to a dialogue. For a student going to an urban middle class school, a new dimension of the world is added to their imagination, painted by Bhuri Bai and her dots. As a follow-up activity, I often ask students to create a painting for Bhuri Bai as a response to her story and in most cases, these visuals are made with lots of dots! Without any instruction students relate and imbibe the form.

I often complement this introduction to Bhuri Bai with Nina Sabnani's animation *Hum chitra banate hain* (We make images). Told playfully, the narrative follows the folk story of how Bhil began painting. The twinkling dots painted in bright colours pull you into the story's world which is not very worldly, but magical. The dots come alive and every Bhil painting you see thereafter evokes the same *jhilmil*! The narrative sets the stage for us to look beyond what we know. It transports the students to another world, where anything is possible. Older students pick up cues about the context. Who are the Bhils, are they a matriarchal community? What is their relationship with animals and plants? What happened after this? Where do they live now? The visual narrative opens a Pandora's box, which is often not possible to do with just text.

Manoranjan Chitrakar created an impactful story scroll as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting the precautionary actions expected from each individual. In a video^ capturing this visual narrative, he slowly opens

*https://map-india.org/exhibition/bhuri-bai-my-life-as-an-artist/

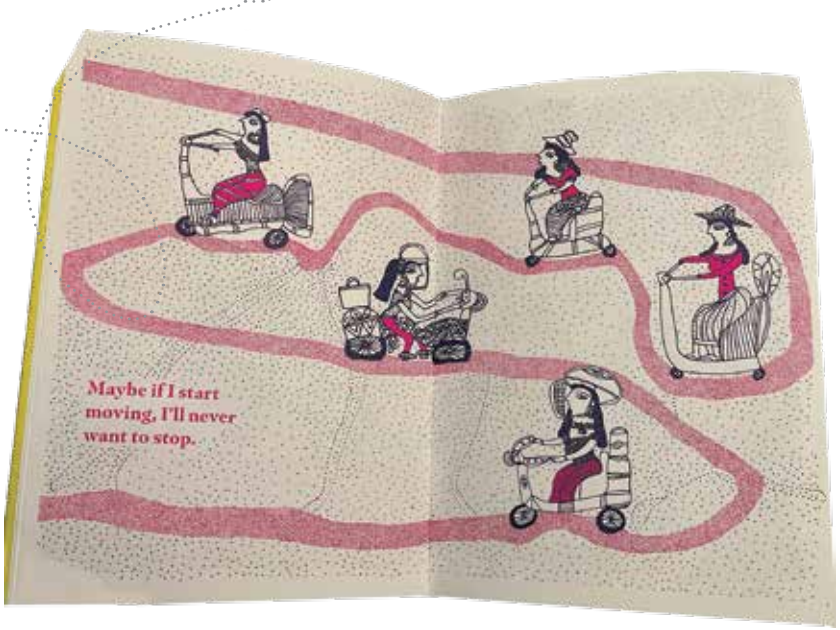
^https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjum5OU_bOE

the scroll frame by frame, accompanying it with a song. It has all the elements of a masterful performance: striking visuals, a catchy song, situated in a phenomenon felt by the whole world, contextualized to his visual and verbal vocabulary. Each element works individually and plays its part in bringing the whole performance together. The scroll is wordless, and yet it communicates all the information it is supposed to without the song. The song works on its own too, but sung with the scroll it captures all your senses. As we rely more and more on the written word, Manu's song, reminds us of the rich oral storytelling traditions that are a significant part of our culture. Some directions in which the class progresses is to look at stories from our everyday lives and how they are communicated. Can there be new ways of presenting the news, what news is presented when, where and why, and so on.

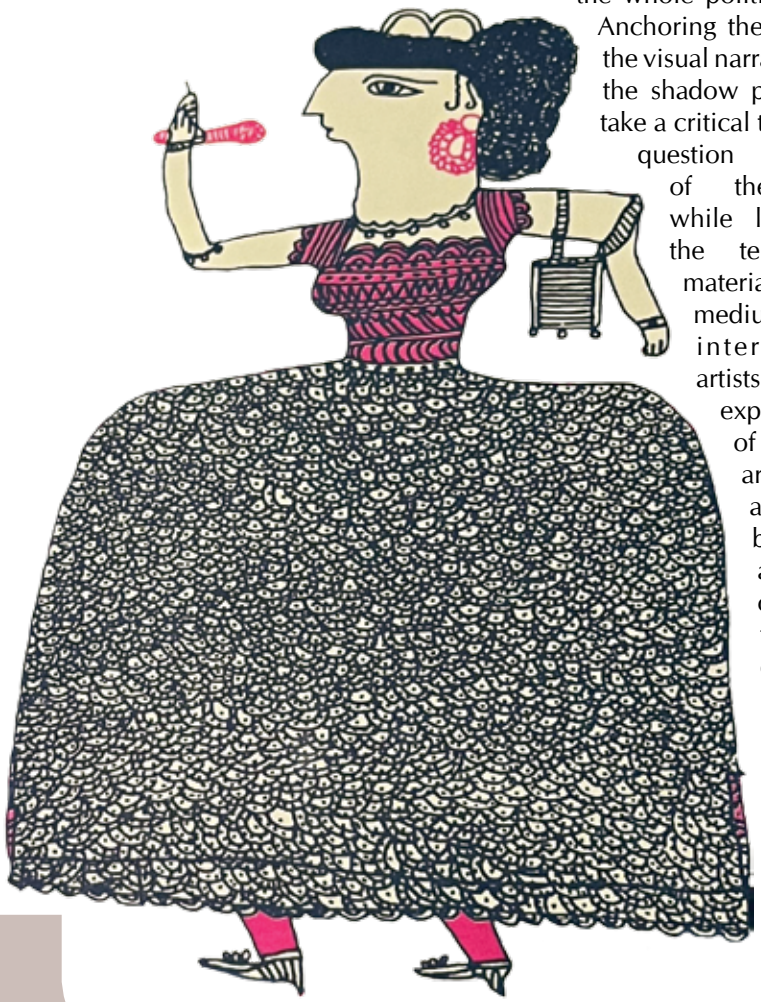
While these are some of the visual narratives I rely on, I asked my colleagues about their intentions and experiences of bringing visual narratives by folk artists to the classroom and I received some insightful anecdotes. Alaka Kavallur shares, "In the words of GN Devy, the linguist, 'Every language reveals a distinct perspective.' Likewise, different visual languages capture varied perspectives and experiences. In the pages of *Bhimayana*, illustrated by Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, traditional folk art introduces profound layers of experience. Such artwork possesses the ability to offer fresh critical insights to viewers from entirely different backgrounds. Rooted in a holistic existence, their art mirrors abundant life experiences and perspectives, intricately conveyed through their adept craftsmanship and creative minds."

According to Devangana Dash, "...bringing these materials inside the classroom is an attempt at listening to a language that is rich in its vocabulary of signs, motifs, and metaphors. I often rely on *The London Jungle Book* by Bhajju Shyam as a resource to share how one's native language is a tool for sense-making and building empathy for another person's experiences. In a visual journal approach, the author-illustrator takes us through his first foreign journey, introducing the reader to the motifs from Gond art. Books like these open up new ways of seeing and building a visual vocabulary that is beyond the dominant used language and holds space for interpretations."

Sudebi Thakurata shares an experience where she had taken her



students to the shadow puppeteer communities, Tholpavakoothu and Tholubommalata in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh to understand the many retellings of Ramayana. She shares how the multi-layered episodic narrative which is often associated primarily with a religion assumes multiple interpretations and different functions in these contexts. It is supposed to pass down intergenerational wisdom through the epic, not only in terms of the stories but the telling and the teller and their inter-relationships along with the modes and media of storytelling, the material, message, and meaning. Further, how it is not about religion but how the narratives and their forms of telling can metaphorically represent so many facets of our lives. She highlights that since the narrative is shared orally, visually, and through material, each generation is able to add a different meaning and interpretation to it, making it contemporary and contextual; making it timeless and ever-relevant. This creates space for dialogue and discourse to understand the connections between the tellings of Ramayana and how it becomes a way of meaning making, subversion, dissent, and a segue into understanding multiple perspectives, like a Dalit Ramayana, a Muslim Ramayana, a feminist Ramayana not feminist Ramayana in the 21st century but even in the 16th century, there are so many different tellings or retellings or versions of it and the whole politics of versions. Anchoring the experience in the visual narrative practise of the shadow puppets, stories take a critical turn as students question the politics of the authorship while learning about the telling through material and medium from these intergenerational artists. They further explore the politics of reducing an artform and artists from being a keeper and conveyer of meaning to a mere entertainer.



Literature classes in school chime between narratives and rules of grammar, vocabulary, classics, and so on. Building a world view often gets lost in this focus on being able to read, write, comprehend, and articulate. In learning how to respond; imagination and wonder sometimes take a back seat. Visual storytelling is not a new format in India, it is old and it varies across regions. We are lucky that we are able to access them today wherever we are and share them with our students as rich sources of learning. This also calls for an acknowledgement of the efforts of editors, publishers, museums, funders, animators, directors, researchers and their teams, the fruits of whose efforts these multimedia resources are. In this article I only scratch the surface of this huge repository. The indigenous visual narrative practices are special because they blur the boundaries between language, visuals, society, geography, and politics with ease and candour. In their specificity to context, they make space for students to reflect on their own environments and build agency to voice these reflections. I hope the readers will build on the few examples shared in this article and find their own favourite voices to bring into their classroom. Voices whose perspectives and stories will enhance how their students make meaning of the world around them, and are empowered to share these views with everyone.

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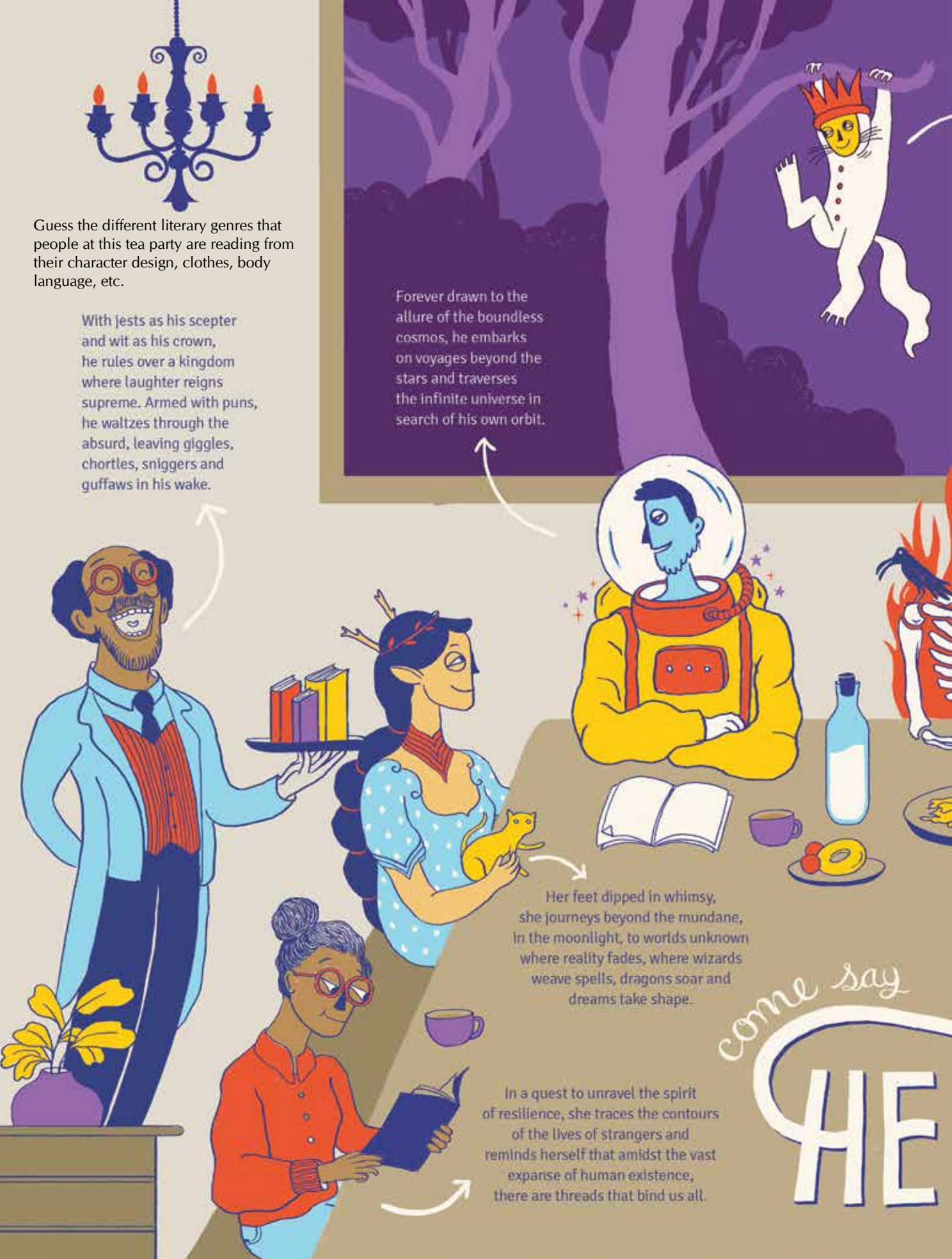
Guess the different literary genres that people at this tea party are reading from their character design, clothes, body language, etc.
With jests as his scepter and wit as his crown, he rules over a kingdom where laughter reigns supreme. Armed with puns, he waltzes through the absurd, leaving giggles, chortles, sniggers and guffaws in his wake.
Forever drawn to the allure of the boundless cosmos, he embarks on voyages beyond the stars and traverses the infinite universe in search of his own orbit.
Her feet dipped in whimsy, she journeys beyond the mundane, in the moonlight, to worlds unknown where reality fades, where wizards weave spells, dragons soar and dreams take shape.
In a quest to unravel the spirit of resilience, she traces the contours of the lives of strangers and reminds herself that amidst the vast expanse of human existence, there are threads that bind us all.
come say
HE

Joyously leaping through portals to whimsical worlds, he celebrates the simplest of joys with boundless enthusiasm and eyes filled with wonder and possibility.
In the shadows of midnight, he plunges into the abyss where terror lurks, seeking the chilling, spine tingling, macabre embrace of fiendish, unearthly spirits.
Their hearts entwined in the tender dance of longing and desire, they navigate the labyrinth of love, forever enchanted by the promise of happily ever afters.
In the rubble of shattered societies, where machines eerily hum with grim prophecies, she braves the desolation, her hope flickering like a dying ember amidst the ashes of a once great world, now teetering on the edge of oblivion.
Captivated by the echoes of bygone eras, she tiptoes through ancient civilizations, a silent sepia tinted observer of triumphs and tragedies, grandeur and strife.
A LITERARY TEA PARTY
LLO
His insatiable curiosity and an uncanny ability to piece together clues lead him on the trail of a long-awaited truth that might be lurking beneath the surface.

Designed and illustrated by Dhwani Shah

Turning the page on climate change

Bijal Vachharajani
is the author of multiple climate-friendly books including *A Cloud Called Bhura, Savi and the Memory Keeper, PS What's Up With the Climate* and *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic*. She co-wrote *10 Indian Champions Who Are Fighting to Save the Planet*. A commissioning editor at Pratham Books, she's now a climate worrier. She can be reached on Instagram at bijalvv.

If someone had told my childhood self that I would grow up to be an author, I would have looked incredulous and gone back to burrowing my nose into a book or staring at a tree, lost in magical lands.

Like the extremely late bloomer that I am, children's books as a career choice came to me late in life as well. I have been a journalist, editor of a magazine, worked with animals, run a school programme on tiger conservation, and managed communication for organizations that worked with farmers, climate, and animal advocacy. All of that non-moss gathering rolling stone action became the grist for my writing and editing career in children's books.

I have always felt woolly wherever I have been – in the classroom as an introverted child, in the newsroom fumbling with ideas, and even at home.

Illustrations: Soumya Menon

Books were my refuge, and it was animals who I turned to for comfort. Which is why being able to write books for children about the environment and animals was a dream come true, only a dream I didn't really know I had. I had always hoped to grow up to be a penguin rescuer (Didn't exactly work out, but I am now a Penguin author).

When I wrote my first nonfiction book, *So You Want to Know About the Environment* (Red Turtle, 2017), it was a way of bringing together my work in climate change, food, water, waste, and wildlife together. I had spent many years reviewing children's books for *Time Out* in India, and writing about them for newspapers and websites, and I always wanted to have a green book about India for middle graders. Our environmental issues, our enigmatic wildlife, our people.

There were so many lovely picture books about animals and the environment published by some amazing publishing houses. But as children grew up, nature seemed to be slipping away from the narrative. One of the big reasons I always loved Ranjit Lal's stories is because they're full of humour, natural history, and adventure, so many fabulous ingredients that make his books absolutely a classic – from *Birds from My Window and the Antics They Get Up To* (Puffin) to *The Tigers of Taboo Valley* (Red Turtle) and *10 Indian Animals You May Never See Again in the Wild* (Duckbill). Memorable characters, rich settings, and tongue-firmly-in-cheek writing.

The same goes for Zai Whitaker, and it's a delight to see so many of her books being republished with new covers and illustrations – whether it's her memoir of *Salim Ali for Children: The Bird Man of India or Cobra in My Kitchen and Other Adventures with Wildlife* (Hachette). The stories are sharp, her writing brimming with a sense of rhythm and the wisdom that comes from years spent with the wild.

Coupled with the writer on the hill, Ruskin Bond, for me these books were my introduction to Indian nature writing for children in English.

But as I finished my non-fiction book, I began thinking back to my Master's. Troubled by my lack of understanding about climate change, I went to study the subject in Costa Rica. As a journalist, I have always been fascinated about the way we talk about the climate crisis – how our opinion about this hard scientific fact is often forged by the media, politics, and peers, rather than data. In one of our classes, I had come across atmospheric brown clouds – a cocktail wrought from emissions from fossil fuels and biomass. The more I read about them and their adverse impact, the more I began imagining what if a tangible brown cloud hovered over the city of Mumbai.

That's how the plot of *A Cloud Called Bhura* (Talking Cub) came together, a climate adventure where four children seek out the truth of the brown cloud, in the smog of disinformation and apathy. I didn't really think of it as climate fiction then. It was not a genre I set out to write. I took six years to write the book, and by the time it got published, Greta Thunberg's clarion call to children across the world was taking root and spreading across the mycorrhizal network of young and old minds. Children were stepping out and becoming part of the Fridays for Future movement and refusing to accept growing up in a climate-changed world.

Writing about climate change seems hard. The science is complex. There's so much jargon to untangle.

But here's the thing, it's very much something we're all witnessing and feeling. In different ways, and very much inequitably, this crisis is defining our lives, it's reshaping the Earth we live in, the contours of it, and threatening several existences.

Recently, someone asked me why climate fiction, and I was thinking that if we are to write anything about our present world, how

can we leave out the changes we see around us? Heat waves, water crisis, livelihood insecurity, bleached coral reefs, changes in weather patterns, food scarcity, and rising prices, these are not future tenses any more. They're very much our present tense. A present, imperfect tense that we are living with, where it impacts some more than others.

And children are the most vulnerable to climate change.

Like my childhood self, I turned to stories to cope. That's why climate fiction. Stories that remind us that climate narratives are not all about post-apocalyptical doom and gloom. That offer hope in the form of solutions, agency to young readers through characters that take on countless challenges in the wake of the climate crisis in different ways, and a way to imagine better futures. As someone who derives comfort from books (and chocolate), fiction is what I turn to, to make sense of the perplexing realities, the characters nudging me into thinking about different perspectives, and of finding answers in the complexity of the make-believe worlds that I love so much.

Closer home, climate change is easiest to find in the non-fiction shelf. Rohan Chakravarty's Green Humour comics have been regaling people while informing them about the crisis, and introducing them to the splendours of the natural world. Yuvan *Aves's Shorewalk* (Tulika Books) is a lyrical exploration of our coast and the perils wrought by the climate crisis. Meghaa Gupta's *Unearthed: An Environmental History of Independent India* (Puffin, 2020) brings to the forefront the story of our country's environment, its people, and its denizens; while Bibek Bhattacharya and Joanna Davala's *Our Beautiful World* is a brilliant primer to climate change.

Meanwhile, Karadi Tales collaborated with People's Archive of Rural India to create a series of books based on 'real stories of rural India, disenfranchised people and communities, and the unique challenges they overcome every day'. These include books about the climate crisis – *Ammini Against the Storm* by Vishaka George and *Versova Vortex* by Subuhi Jiwani.

Dubbed the Greta Thunberg Effect in *The Guardian*, books about the climate crisis have been gaining traction in publishing houses across the world. Internationally, author Lauren James started a collective called the Climate Fiction Writers League, which is home to writers from different parts of the world. James, MG Leonard, Nicola Penfold, Bren MacDibble, Eli Brown, LR Lam, Rebecca Lim, Oisín McGann, Tolá Okogwu, Neal and Brendan Shusterman, Louie Stowell are some of the authors who have put climate change in their stories.

A welcome occurrence, after all in 2012, a study *showed that "there have been significant declines in depictions of natural environments and animals, while built environments have become much more common" in picture books that had won the prestigious Caldecott Medal from the years 1938 to 2008.

Already in 2005, author Richard Louv had introduced the concept of nature-deficit disorder in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*. On his blog, he explains, "I coined the phrase to serve as a description of the human costs of alienation from nature… as a way to talk about an urgent problem that many of us knew was growing, but had no language to describe it." Professor Peter Kahn and Thea Wiess co-authored a paper where they described the term "environmental generational amnesia – the idea that each generation perceives

*Jr, J. & Podeschi, Christopher & Palmer, Nathan & Schwadel, Philip & Meyler, Deanna. (2012). The Human-Environment Dialog in Award-Winning Children's Picture Books. Sociological Inquiry. 82. 145-159. 10.1111/j.1475-682X.2011.00399.x.

the environment into which it's born, no matter how developed, urbanized or polluted, as the norm. And so, what each generation comes to think of as 'nature' is relative, based on what it's exposed to."

That means, a child growing up in Delhi with its rising AQI (Air Quality Index) will know winters as forever smoggy and hurtful to her lungs. Or that water scarcity in Bengaluru is just the new normal. I see this in my interactions with urban children, their dominant memories of their city are of pollution, cement, garbage, horns, and heat. Increasingly, children can't tell a myna from a crow, or name five common trees including the gulmohar or the mango. Forget naming, often they have not climbed a tree. Ever.

Books then become a sort of archive for our climate. But also, a celebration. An invitation back to the natural world. Start young, with stories that make children fall in love with their planet and its denizens. After all, we protect what we love. Then inspire. Read, and explore the natural world. Share the problems, yes. But also share the stories of people who champion the planet, who work hard every day to find solutions to protect, adapt, mitigate, and conserve. The wonderful animals, insects, birds we share our planet with. It's their enthusiasm for stories and the natural world that continue to offer me hope and keep me writing.

I sat on a virtual assembly one Earth Day, moved by the pledges of children – they promised to walk to school or car pool, stop using plastic, waste less, recycle more. But I realized in all of this, what we really need is a rallying pledge to love and explore our planet with empathy – the trees of our neighbourhood, the plants in our school playground, the spiders, butterflies and moths, geckos, birds, and insects in our society's backyard. Only when you know that one tree intimately, will you want to protect it. Else it's just a tree. Or just a bird. Or just an elephant. Or just a tiger. Or just a planet.

12 climate books for your library

1. *Future Hopes: Hopeful stories in a time of climate change* edited by Lauren James
1. Ranjit Lal's *10 Indian Animals You May Never See Again in the Wild*
2. Rohan Chakravarty's *Naturalist Ruddy*
3. Yuvan Aves's *Shorewalk*
4. Various: *We Hope: Children on Climate Change*
5. Meghaa Gupta's *Unearthed: An Environmental History of Independent India*
6. Bibek Bhattacharya and Joanna Davala's *Our Beautiful World*
7. Nicola Penfold's *Between Sea and Sky*
8. Lauren James's *Green Rising*
9. MG Leonard's *Beetle Boy* series
10. StORI Series by Karadi Tales
11. Anushka Ravishankar, Karthika Naïr, Salil Chaturvedi, Sampurna Chattarji, Aindri C's *Earth, Our Home*

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Philosophy through literature

Gareth B. Matthews' method

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During the 1970s, several American philosophers and educationists were engaged in bringing philosophy to young children and adolescents. While they were united in this endeavour, each of them advocated a distinctive rationale and approach. Gareth B. Matthews (1929 – 2011) was one among the proponents of the 'Philosophy with Children' movement. After obtaining a PhD in philosophy from Harvard, he began his teaching career as an assistant professor at the University of Virginia in 1960. The first instance of his drawing a connection between children and philosophy can be traced back to his interactions with his own children during the 1960s. His book *Dialogues with Children* is a collection of his conversations with 8-11 year old children at St. Mary's Music School in Edinburgh, Scotland. Throughout his career, Matthews visited schools in the US and abroad to hold philosophical dialogues. He was also a contributing editor (1979-2006) of the journal *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children* in which he had a column titled "Thinking in Stories". In this column he reviewed 58 children's stories that are interesting from a philosophical point of view. These stories ranged from novels such as *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt to picture books like *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen and John Schoenherr. He also co-authored a series of teacher guides titled *Wise Owl: Talking and Thinking about Children's Literature*.

Matthews' work with children has at least three striking features:

- One, use of existing children's literature as a rich source of philosophical problems and concepts.
- Two, his unique story-beginning method.
- Three, his belief that philosophical discussions between adults and children are not only enriching for the child but also for the adult, primarily due to the inventiveness, imaginativeness, playfulness, and freshness in children's ways of thinking.

Why philosophize with children?

In the modern world we typically think of philosophy in the context of college education. A lack of formal and informal opportunities for engaging young children in a philosophical dialogue is usually the norm. Partly, this is a result of the ways in which we have come to think about both philosophy and children. Philosophy is usually, though incorrectly, considered an abstract and difficult subject, making it unsuitable for children and best reserved for adults. Through his interactions with children, Matthews learned that they are likely to raise and be perplexed by most of the basic questions of philosophy without any formal introduction to philosophical thought. After all, children experience life and life itself is the source of perennial questions of philosophy. In his observations, children were far more imaginative and inventive in their philosophical thinking than most adults are

and were able to offer a fresh philosophical perspective. They also displayed non-attachment to ideas during philosophical investigations. Several of them could ask piercing questions, articulate analogies and sustain the rigour of a philosophical dialogue. However, adults are often unable to recognize children's questions and remarks for their philosophical content. Due to their own socialization into other ways of thinking, adults' ability to revisit questions they themselves once regarded with wonder becomes rare. Further, children are not necessarily considered persons in their own right – with ways of thinking and questioning which could add value to an adult's life, and in the way we go about participating and shaping the communities we inhabit. According to Matthews, 20th century developmental theories contributed to this attitude towards childhood and children. He was particularly critical of Jean Piaget's* work and held the view that Piaget's experiments failed to make allowance for children's philosophical thinking. Conceptions of childhood that view this phase as one of 'deficit' in comparison to adulthood have impacted adult-child interactions.

Illustrations: Sunil Chawdiker

What constitutes thinking philosophically?

Consider the questions: "Papa, how do I know if I am not dreaming right now?" and "Am I living in somebody else's dream?" When children ask such questions they are puzzled about how to tell apart the states of being awake and dreaming, which many of us may unquestioningly assume to know. They are also wondering about what is real and how one can know it. To approach these questions philosophically is to be in conversation with and allow the child to explore ways in which the child is able to arrive at a distinction, even if tentatively. Talking about the differences one notices between being awake and dreaming is one way to approach the problem.

Let's look at another example. "Aunty, look your flowers are happy." Adults often personify objects and so do children. However, when a young child

*Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss psychologist well-known for his theory of cognitive development. In his theory, he proposed an account of cognitive development along four stages: the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage and the formal operational stage. In this account, the ability to reason theories and engage with abstractions were associated with the last stage, and in children of roughly 11-12 years and above. (Siegler, Robert, Alibali, Martha, *Piaget's Theory of Development, Children's Thinking*, Prentice Hall, 2004)

remarks about the state of a non-human yet animate entity like a flower, they *may* be communicating something about their conception of flowers and happiness. Asking the following questions could help uncover the philosophical potential of the remark: Can flowers be happy? Can a flower have feelings if it doesn't have a mind and a brain? Is happiness a feeling? What is happiness for a flower? Is it the same as happiness for humans? How do you know the flower is happy? Does the flower know that it is happy even as it looks happy to us? Of course, it's entirely possible that the child may themselves pose some of these questions as part of the philosophical exploration.

Now, consider another question: "Do you ever wish that you could live forever?" Upon hearing this, adults and children alike may laugh it off or merely state that everyone has to die someday instead of pursuing the thought experiment proposed by the question. To think about this hypothetical situation philosophically would require us to delve deeper into the concept of death and what it means, but also what it means to live forever. To pursue these questions, is to slowly begin to philosophize.

Philosophical perplexities in children's literature

Some of the most familiar and frequent ways of engaging children of various ages through a literary work are comprehension-based questions, understanding the literary devices used, the themes and symbolism, vocabulary work, and character analysis. What Matthews noticed about some of the children's literature was also its ability to directly, and often humorously, raise philosophical problems.

Let's consider an example. *The Garden* by Arnold Lobel is a story with simple vocabulary and ideas. In this story, Toad follows his friend Frog's example and plants seeds in his garden. When the seeds don't grow immediately, Toad shouts at them expecting them to grow henceforth. When the seeds still don't grow and Frog points out to Toad that he must've frightened the seeds, a worried Toad lights candles, sings, reads, and plays music to the seeds. The seeds still don't seem to grow. Finally, when the seeds sprout, Toad tells his friend Frog that he was right all along – growing seeds is hard work (for Toad).

In a conventional classroom a discussion is likely to stay limited to questions such as: Why did Toad sing to the seeds? Have you ever grown any plant from seeds? Were you anxious like Toad or patiently allowed your seeds to sprout? What do you think about Frog and Toad's friendship? However, the profoundness of the joke and the question it raises about causal explanation is missed out, to say the least.

Matthews discusses this story in the *Wise Owl* series to show the philosophical potential in the story with the following questions:

1. Is Toad's hard work what made his seeds grow? How do we *know*?
2. Toad doesn't have enough patience to wait for his seeds to grow. What is patience?
3. What causes fear? Who or what is afraid?
4. To these questions, we could add: what is causal relationship?

Matthews' story-beginning technique

Through his informal interactions with children, Matthews established that it wasn't unusual for children between the ages of three and seven to think philosophically. To engage with children of ages eight and above he developed a unique story-beginning method. He wrote and presented to children an original story-beginning which contained a philosophical problem. Then he would ask them to further develop the story. Children would launch into a discussion around the problem – arguing, reasoning, thinking analogies, questioning each other. The story-ending would be written by Matthews after and based on the children's discussion. Later, he would return to the group with the story-ending to determine if it did justice to their ideas. Given below is an example of a story-beginning that draws on the Ship of Theseus.

"It's a very beautiful ship," Freddie explained.

"It's all gleaming and white. It's like a ship from a movie. In fact, it has been used in making pirate films."

"How old did you say the ship is?" asked Freddie's father.

"I think the guide said it was built about 1840 or something," replied Freddie, "but only a few years later it got sunk in a big battle. It stayed on the ocean bottom for years and years. Then about two years ago it was salvaged, brought up from the bottom. It's now the oldest sailing ship afloat."

"Really!" put in Freddie's mother. "Then it must be quite dilapidated."

"Oh no!" Freddie assured her, "not at all. The guide told us

that when they brought it up... uh brought her up...” – Freddie suddenly remembered that ships are considered feminine – “they found that much of the decking was rotten. So they replaced most of that, board by board. Then they found some of the ribs were rotten too, so they replaced them. Finally, they got worried about the sides, you know, the outside of the hull. They ended up replacing much of that as well, one board at a time. Now almost all the boards on the ship are new and very smooth and solid and well painted. She’s a beautiful ship.”

“Then it can’t be the oldest sailing ship afloat,” sneered Alice, ignoring the rule about calling the ship “her”. “It can’t be, if almost all of the boards are new. It’s a new ship. It may be modelled after an old ship, but it’s a new ship.”

Matthews took this story-beginning to a group of 8-11 year-olds in a music school. A snippet from their discussion is given below.

Matthews: “What's the problem?” (In order to check whether the students understood the problem.)

“The problem is that...we want to find out which is which,” replied Donald. “Is the ship the old ship, or is the ship just a model, a replica, a copy of the original ship?”

David-Paul: “That’s easy.”

Matthews: “What’s easy?”

David-Paul: “If there are still a few planks left, it’s the old ship.”

Esther: “There must be some planks left.”

David-Paul: “Perhaps the spirit of the old ship would still be there. It’s not really a new ship if it’s got some of the old timbers...and the spirit of the old ship.”

Matthews: “...suppose the only thing left from the ship is the keel. How many say it is still the old ship?”

Matthews: “So the keel is the important thing?”

David-Paul: “I think the ribs and the keel are the most important parts of it.”

Matthews: “But so long as the keel remains, it’s the same ship?”

David-Paul: "No. People never see the keel anyway."

Donald: "It doesn't matter whether you can see it. That doesn't mean it isn't the old ship, just because people can't see that it is."

Ise: "[Suppose] it's still got the old cabin on it."

Donald: "It doesn't matter whether you build something new onto it, as long as it's the same ship underneath."

David-Paul: "So they mean to say that if you've got this castle that's completely rebuilt and that's got only this one stone from the old castle – all the other stones are new – that it's the old castle."

In the course of this conversation, continuity, change, and whether an object remains the same even as it undergoes significant changes become the focal points of discussion.

In his story-ending Matthews incorporated significant aspects of the discussion and steered clear of resolving the problem on his own.

"Wait a minute", said Angus; it was his turn to be skeptical. "Suppose you just have one tiny piece left that belonged to the ship at the beginning – a tiny, tiny piece, maybe just a splinter – everything else new, [as recent as] 1982. How could it still be the old ship?"

"That would be going too far," agreed Freddie, "if there was just a splinter."

"Well, suppose it was bigger than a splinter, but just one small piece of board," suggested Angus.

Freddie hesitated, "I guess that would still be going too far," he admitted.

"But how far is too far?" pressed Angus...

Now compare this with all the cells in our body getting replaced every few days; yet we ascribe sameness to who we are across time.

Conclusion

The above discussion demonstrates children's capability to engage in a philosophical dialogue, relevance of philosophy in our lives and the potential for such conversations that lies in children's literature. Certainly, adults interested in using literature to hold dialogues with children could take a few cues from Matthews' method. Though an equal participant in asking questions, listening to others, inducing perplexity and pointing out unsatisfactory ideas, an adult must avoid steering the conversation in any particular direction or intervening between two arguing children to find a quick resolution. Undoubtedly, as part of the process, adults would need to examine their conception of childhood and ask themselves whether children's thoughts and questions could add value to their own ways of thinking and living. Of course, selection of literature, pre-reading, and thinking about philosophical issues in the story would all be part of their role too. For these, Matthews has left us plenty of resources as guidelines. There is no reason for us to believe that the potential he recognizes in Western literature is not present in Indian children's literature. Also, to our advantage, translations of stories such as *Many Moons* by James Thurber and *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry are available in many Indian languages.

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Taxonomy through tales

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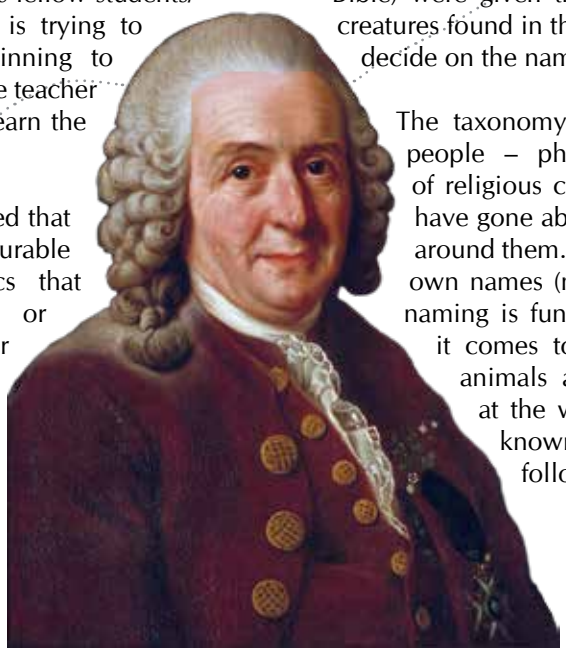
Ask any biology teacher about topics that students groan about in class and you are very likely to hear taxonomy topping the list. Taxonomy is the science of classifying organisms; to classify, you have to identify them and then give them a name. For animals, names have to follow the rules set by The International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN). This may seem a bit like "the egg or chicken story (which came first)"; in order to name them one has to identify them and to share the identity, one has to call them by a name so that one's fellow students/ colleagues know what one is trying to convey. Is your head beginning to spin? Imagine the plight of the teacher who has to get students to learn the intricacies of classification!

Over the years, I have realized that stories could create a favourable atmosphere to learn topics that could otherwise confuse or bore students. Stories for teaching topics in science do not come to you in a readymade form. They lie among the important events in history which need to be woven as stories in class. It's not very difficult. Some of the events may even give your class a good laugh. What story could you use for teaching classification in biology?

This science of taxonomy – identifying, naming, and classifying – has a very long history; and stories therefore are there for you in plenty. Students' familiarity with the history of taxonomy resonates only with Carl Linnaeus, 'the father of modern taxonomy.' The story though starts much, much, earlier, to that time when Adam and Eve (or so we learn from the Bible) were given their first task – to name all the creatures found in the Garden of Eden. How did they decide on the names?

The taxonomy stories lie in the way various people – philosophers, scientists, members of religious communities, villagers, citizens – have gone about naming the diverse creatures around them. After all even students have their own names (nicknames) for their teachers. So naming is fun. But it's serious business when it comes to providing accurate names for animals and plants and they cannot be at the whims and fancies of people, as known from history; today they have to follow set rules and regulations.



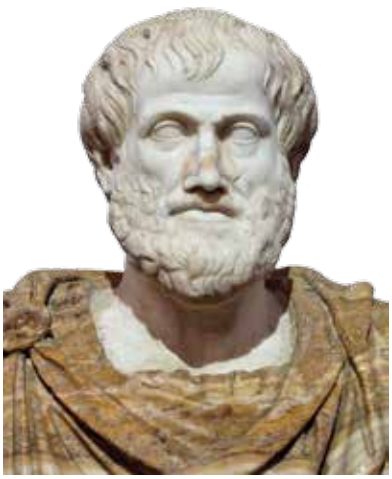
Carl Linneaus
Source: National Museum, Stockholm
Courtesy: www.commons.wikimedia.org

Stories for a taxonomy lesson

So this story details how some famous historical persons named the diverse organisms we see around us. Since what is learnt today is based on the way the western world has gone about providing names, let's start with the Greek and Roman philosophers.

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher and polymath, lived between 384-322 BCE. He wrote on a wide range of topics, including classification. He observed and studied the many different organisms on Earth and proceeded to organize them in some order for further studies. His theories for classification were based on observations. He detailed hundreds of animals in his monumental work *Historia Animalium*. He was also the first person to attempt classifying insects. Now that's no mean effort, for we know that insects are among the largest number of animals that live on Earth. His classification of insects based on the presence or absence of wings is recognized till today for classifying insects. But then not all those who followed him were so systematic.

Several centuries later, another philosopher jumped into the fray to detail all animals present on Earth – Gaius Plinius Secundus (CE 23/24 – CE 79), the Roman philosopher, known famously as Pliny the Elder. Soldier, lawyer, naturalist, and writer, he wanted to record everything that existed. His most famous work is the 37 volumes of encyclopedia on natural history known as *Historia Naturalis*. And insects were among the ones he recorded. In the 11th volume[1], he gives his views on insects and attempts to group them. In his desire to describe every insect on Earth, he did not pay attention to detail like Aristotle. So we find some amusing statements. Caterpillars, according to him, originated from dew on radish leaves ([2]Berenbaum, 1995); grasshoppers have neither a mouth nor an outlet for food. Whereas Aristotle used a single character to classify insects, Pliny the Elder's classification was more a confusion. Despite the inaccuracies, however, he was considered an authority and for the next 1400 years, quoted on matters of natural history.



Aristotle
Source: Ludovisi Collection
Courtesy: www.commons.wikimedia.org

In CE 1230, a French Philosopher, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, compiled 12 volumes of *De Proprietatibus Rerum* ("On the Properties of Things"), an ambitious work to describe everything in the universe. Unlike Pliny the Elder, and more like Aristotle, he based his classification of creatures on the principle of motion. Naturally, there were some hilarious conclusions. In his volume 12, which is a discussion of air, he writes about all flying things. So birds and flying insects are classified to be similar. According to him, the locust was a bird.

Pliny the Elder
Courtesy: www.commons.wikimedia.org

Although bees fly, they have many feet and scuttle about on the ground. Hence he said that they should be grouped with land animals.

The word 'bug' makes its presence during the era of Bartholomaeus, and referred to a ghost or hobgoblin, to anything difficult to see or unpleasant ([2]Berenbaum, 1995). Hilarious as this may sound, we must not forget that even today, humans use the word 'bug' to refer to anything that is unpleasant or creepy crawly – from worms, spiders, insects to millipedes, centipedes, and molluscs.

Who was the earliest taxonomist?

Taxonomy, as it is taught today, evolved from the history of the Western world.[3] Shen Nung, a legendary Emperor of China (3000 BCE) who introduced acupuncture was revered as the father of Chinese medicine. He is supposed to have tasted hundreds of herbs to test their medicinal value and produced a pharmacopoeia called *Divine Husbandman's Materia Medica*. It detailed around 365 medicines derived from plants, animals, and minerals. He died due to an overdose of a toxic tasting of a herb extract. He was probably the

earliest taxonomist, but modern day writers generally recognize Aristotle as the father of taxonomy and so the story starts with him.

A fun activity

Let's pause and reflect: If we were the first creations of God – like Adam and Eve – and asked to name all creatures around us, what names would we have given them?

Set this task for your class. Divide them into groups and ask them to imagine they are Adams and Eves. The task is to name any five creatures they see around them. They must forget that the creatures have names. Imagine that they do not have names. What would they call them? What names would they give these creatures? Why? What would Eve have called that animal we know as a frog? Or a cockroach? A bird? This is just a fun activity. Spend a few minutes allowing students to tell you how they came up with the names. The process they used will be useful to teach later. Don't spend too much time, as you will come up with these and other questions later as you proceed with the topic.

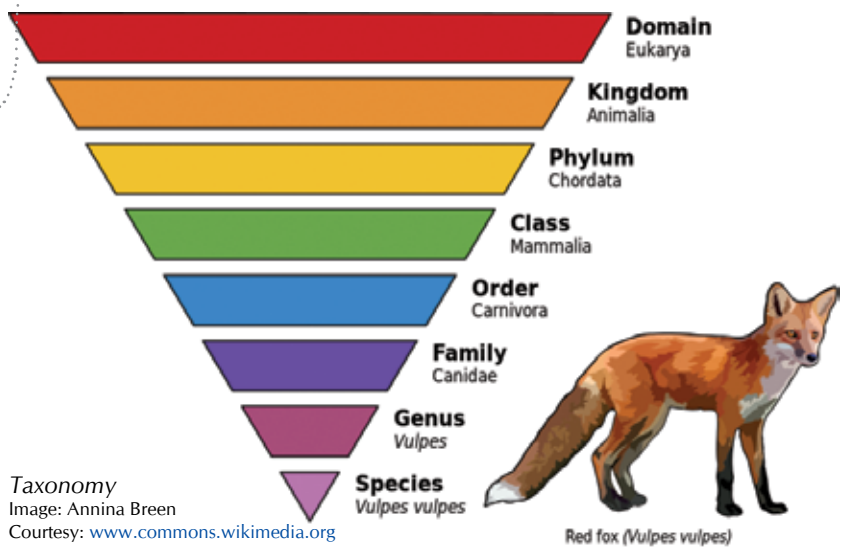
Taking the topic forward

Follow the activity by giving them a short document to read – on how taxonomists have named the same creatures they have already given names to. Point to the two names that every creature has: the first name is known as the 'Genus' name and the second, the 'Species' name (which is its accurate identity). This system of naming any animal or plant with two names is called the binomial nomenclature. For e.g., humans are scientifically known as *Homo sapiens*. The house sparrow is called *Passer domesticus*.

The story of taxonomy would be incomplete without mentioning some of the ludicrous ways in which species were named before Carl Linnaeus (father of modern taxonomy) established the binomial classification system. For e.g., when microscopes began to be used, investigators could observe greater details of insects, so names no longer remained simple as investigators tried to include all features they saw into naming the creatures. A species of butterfly was named, *Papilio media alis pronis praefertim interioribus maculis oblongis argenteis perebelle depictis* ([2]Berenbaum, 1995).

I hope I have made a case for not complaining about learning the shortened binomial nomenclature and taxonomy made much simpler and logical by Linnaeus. Make your learning easy and use this acronym to remember the levels of hierarchy in taxonomy – Domain, Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, and Species:
Do **K**ings **P**lay **C**hess **O**n **F**ine **G**rain **S**and?

History is replete with events that would be eye-openers for us. Did you know that it was Jagadish Chandra Bose and not Marconi who set up the world's first functioning wireless system? Or that Marconi, used Bose's radio receiver for testing his wireless transmission, without acknowledging or giving Bose any credit? Or that Watson and Crick actually stole Rosalind's work to figure out the DNA structure? Stories facilitate learning that goes beyond just facts and figures. They make learning science very interesting while also providing a perspective on human behaviour.



Taxonomy
Image: Annina Breen
Courtesy: www.commons.wikimedia.org

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Superbug stories

Finding our place in a complex health problem

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Come summer and my dearest memories are of the comics I got during my train rides when we travelled to my native village in Bengal from Mumbai. The colourful, simple stories with banter, laughter, and adventure made it easier to distract myself from the rather long and tiresome journey. It was also in these comics that I could see people of the world in very plain terms – their likes and dislikes, struggles and wins, biases and prejudices.

I wondered if similar stories could also be utilized to un-complicate an urgent health problem called AMR (Anti Microbial Resistance) – a problem that's sweeping across the globe and yet stays out of public conversations?

AMR is a situation where antimicrobial drugs such as antibiotics are not effective against the disease-causing microbes they are supposed to kill. Such microbes are called drug-resistant microbes or simply superbugs. AMR today, thanks to these superbugs, has reached the scale of a pandemic. It kills an estimated five million people a year globally, and India is the hotbed of this issue. Then why is it that most of us don't know about it?

The simple answer is because it's a very complex problem.

A mural on AMR at LV Prasad Eye Institute

Photos courtesy: Somdatta Karak

One, unlike the COVID-19 pandemic, AMR is not caused by one microbe, manifesting one disease. Antibiotics are not working against bacteria, antifungals are failing against fungal infections, and so are antiparasitic drugs against parasitic infections. Two, AMR is a result of the natural process of microbes evolving; one that cannot be avoided altogether. Hence, there is a sense of inevitability to the problem. Three, AMR or the rate at which microbes are evolving can be slowed down by reducing the prevalence of antimicrobial drugs in our environment. But there

A grassroot comics in the making

are many stakeholders who have to play their roles to ensure this. And therefore, it becomes easy for each one to think that it's not within their personal capacity to deal with the issue. Fourth, despite the huge number of AMR-related deaths, death certificates do not mention AMR as the cause of death. Instead, they record immediate reasons such as organ failure. And thus, AMR seems like an invisible and unrelatable problem that appears only in scientific and medical journals.

Could stories help people break down the complexities of AMR into small pieces that relate to their lives? Driven by this question, Sarah Hyder Iqbal and Ponnari Gottipati, both life scientists turned science communicator and research manager respectively, initiated the 'Superheroes against Superbugs' initiative. They wanted to reach out to young people because this fast-growing problem will hit them the most in the coming decades. This is when I joined the team, and we started working with high schoolers to enhance their awareness of the problem.

While we wanted to start with their existing understanding of microbes, we wanted to highlight different ways of reducing the use of antimicrobials and thus slowing the spread of AMR. This included the importance of sanitation and hygiene to avoid infections, taking antimicrobials only when doctors prescribe them and finishing their entire course. We had many hands-on interactive activities and discussions with experts to understand the science behind AMR. But we didn't want these to just stay as classroom activities with no relevance to their real lives. We also did not want to hand them another set of many guidelines. We wanted the participants to build their own narratives of hygiene, antibiotic use, and misuse. And we wanted these narratives to be made as stories of fun and adventure, where the makers see themselves as superheroes.

Superheroes and comics go hand-in-hand. Sharad Sharma, founder of World Comics India, introduced us to the format of grassroot comics. This format has enabled many marginalized people to tell their stories in the way they want to. They designed their own characters and wrote in languages they speak in. And these comics, unlike the colourful ones that most of us are used to, are in black and white. But, they are equally captivating, thanks to the simple and crisp storylines, playful language, and design elements.

CARE BUT DON'T SHARE
First day:-
You have a bacteria in stomach infection take these antibiotics for 5 days and have lot of curd along with us.
Doctor I have Stomach cramps diarrheea and Vomiting
After two days:- The girl is feeling better so she stops taking antibiotics. Her brother feeling unwell.
Take these antibiotics I started to feel better after taking them you'll get better too!
After few days:-
oh no! you both are sick now. We will take you both to the doctor
Always finish the course of the antibiotics and never share them with any body always take doctor's advise before taking antibiotic
N. Finaly

School conversations with grassroot comics

With Sharad introducing the participants to basic design tricks and the Superheroes against Superbugs team ensuring the science depicted in the comics is right, the participants were set to design their own comics, inspired by their own lives and take-aways from the workshop. Comics that they could call their own!

When we saw the different comics that our workshop participants made, we noticed differences in the kinds of stories that students of different backgrounds told us. A large number of students who came from a residential government school and belonged to under-privileged communities focused their comics on hygiene. Students of an urban elite school made a significant number of comics emphasizing antibiotic misuse and abuse, suggesting the easy availability of antimicrobial drugs in their lives. Students from farming communities made comics talking of antibiotic overuse in farming. Those staying near rivers related with water pollution due to industrial effluents from antimicrobial manufacturing industries.

These comics became conversation starters between the participants and other students and teachers in their schools as well as their parents. The comics have now also become byte-sized simple pieces of information that we use in our conversations with older students and citizenry as well as other AMR enthusiasts who want to know how people perceive AMR.

While the black and white comics are very economical for us to reproduce for multiple occasions, we also wanted to gather the attention of urban young people using colours. With a bunch of undergraduate students from a college in Hyderabad and Dibyush Jena, an artist from Odisha, we conceptualized a mural that would connect with the city. The makers of the mural wanted to show how people with varied backgrounds and expertise need to come together to fight AMR with a simple central message of controlling AMR by using antimicrobial drugs judiciously.

The mural has moved across the city through a café, research institutes and university, medical hospitals, housing communities, innovation hubs and city festivals. Along with the 8x8 ft mural, we let people come and paint their own art pieces on MDF boards (Medium Density Fibre boards, easily bought from physical and online art stores), 10 cm in diameter with a message on AMR. We saw people loving the process of painting, and we recorded them making reminders on the right antibiotic use and the emergence of resistant microbes for themselves and their near and dear ones.

And through these experiments with different formats of storytelling and messaging on AMR, we realized visual arts can catch people's attention and help them engage on a rather technical subject. Sketch pens and paints help people lighten up to be able to bring in humour and hope to an otherwise gloomy topic of AMR – this is something that has been close to our hearts. We strive to leave people with hope on fighting the problem of AMR in their own ways – be it as a responsible consumer of antibiotics, or an educated healthcare professional, or an innovator. And creating stories on a four-panelled comic strip or an imagery for a magnet enables us to look at AMR from a personal lens, by identifying how the problem affects us and our own capacity in dealing with it. Thus, creating Superheroes against Superbugs.

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Personal reminders on AMR through self-made magnets

Like finding pieces of your soul

Books and the magic of rereading

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In the Harry Potter series, the dark wizard Voldemort creates something called a Horcrux. These are objects that house pieces of his soul; so long as the object remains whole and unbroken, Voldemort cannot be killed. This is great if you're a Dark Lord with aspirations of immortality; not so great if you're even vaguely concerned with morals – as most characters in children's literature tend to be. In fact, there's very little that's sympathetic about Voldemort, even on a rereading of the books. And I would know, as someone who's reread them. A lot.

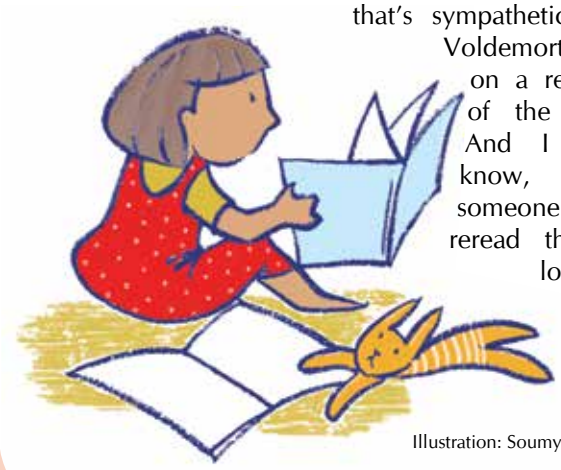


Illustration: Soumya Menon

I'm a serial rereader. This was once considered a bad habit by my mother. "When will you ever read *other* books?" she'd ask when she caught me reopening *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. "When will you graduate to something...more?" She complained when I told her I was finishing *Harry Potter* and the *Prisoner of Azkaban* for the third time in as many months. By the time I had completed a long-targeted seventh reread of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, she had given up asking.

Why would someone reread a book not just once, but multiple times? It's a valid question, especially when posed to someone who enjoys reading as much as I do. Shouldn't a bookworm *want* to use their reading hours – hours that become increasingly harder to find, as one gets older and life unwinds – to experience as many books as possible? Isn't that what most reading challenges are about, expanding literary lists and cutting down a hypothetical reading pile? Why spend a significant portion of those

hours reading the same thing over and over again?

We're going to try and answer this extremely important question here.

The Julius Caesar game

In class 9, I was introduced to Shakespeare. His *Julius Caesar* was on the syllabus for the dreaded ICSE board exams, and in preparation I read *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*. I did this on the off-chance that the teacher asked, "Has anyone read any Shakespeare before?", so I could put my hand up and stun my classmates with my brilliance. Unfortunately for my 14-year-old self, this did not happen.

It was only when classes began, and my English teacher started reading the text aloud, that I realized – I had not actually read Shakespeare. I had run my eyes over the lines of two plays, chasing verses until the close of Act V. I had an idea of the plots, and I could probably name a few characters, but I hadn't lingered over the music of the language. To be fair, I did not have the skill set needed to appreciate it, but over the course of two years, it would be built into me, one line at a time.

Through *Caesar*, I learned what it meant to actually *read* a text in a classroom setting. We spent entire lessons dedicated to teasing apart the meaning of a single line, traced terms through spirals of etymology, unpacked a character's psyche through their asides and the metaphors they chose to use. We spent so much time – two whole school years – immersed in this play, learning to appreciate every word choice, every stray allusion. In fact, because we read it so very closely, quotes from Caesar actually ended up in everyday school conversations, and my friends and I would play a game during lunch break, where we'd scrawl character names on the board from memory. When we ran out of 'real' names, we'd compete to see who could come up with the most ludicrous nouns from the text: a lion gazing at Caesar in the street, the adder that could strike someone down, Brutus' sword that (spoiler alert!) runs him through at the end.

The point is, because we spent so much time reading and rereading and decoding the play, its language became ours. It's been years since I read *Caesar*, but I can still hear its music, the faint notes of 'Friends, Romans, countrymen' tickling my ears. That play, and those classes, taught me how to immerse myself in a text, and bring it to life in an academic setting. And even more miraculously, how to take a text out of an academic setting and breathe it into life.

Taking the Ring to Mordor

A couple of weeks ago, I saw a meme that said 'nobody understands the bond between a girl and the mediocre book she read when she was 13.' This hit home; at least two of the books that I consider among my 'favourites,' that I've reread a lot, came into my life around that time. One of those was *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)*, the book that made me a fantasy fan for life.

We had a copy of this book at home, old and flaking apart. I remember thinking, 'If I read this, I can read anything' – both because it was so massive (the longest book I'd ever attempted at the age of 12) and because it was the first one I read from the 'grown-up' shelf at home. Until then, my reading had been restricted to the standalone bookshelf I shared with my sister, and offerings from the children's library at Secunderabad Club.

I loved *LOTR*, and when my uncle told me he'd read it seven times, I made it my mission to best him. The book became a

part of my identity. I learned Elvish* and made collages featuring the characters. Like many young teenagers, I needed something to build my sense of self around, and the book delivered. Rereading it became a way to define myself, at a time when I needed it most.

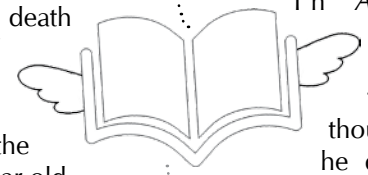
I wonder if that's why the 'girl' from the meme is so connected to her 'mediocre' book. Thirteen-year-olds aren't known for their self-esteem, and books, unlike people, don't make you feel self-conscious. At least, not if they're done well.

From stones to hallows

Among the many gifts *LOTR* gave me was an abiding love of fantasy. And one of the benefits of classic fantasy is that books tend not to be standalones, but series comprised of three, five, seven books. Sometimes more.

Harry Potter is one of those series. I started the books when I was 12, and they kept pace with me as I grew up. When Harry finally left school and flashed forward into adulthood, I had graduated and started a new chapter of my life in college. We saw off our childhoods together, moving in lockstep, or so it seemed.

Of course, I've reread the Harry Potter books many, many times. Possibly more times than I have LOTR. Because those books saw me through six years, I've stocked them with a multitude of memories. Sometimes, I think I react to specific scenes in certain ways because at this point, some part of me expects to feel a certain way. The first time I read Sirius's death scene in *Order of the Phoenix*, for instance, I was inconsolable in the way only a 14-year-old dealing with her first heartbreak can be. The experience was so vivid that it's coloured every ensuing encounter, with the result being that every time I reread *Order*, I find myself sobbing openly over those chapters, even now at the ripe old age of 34.



It's almost like I become a past version of myself, reconnecting with a part of my soul that's housed – somewhat bittersweetly – in those pages. Stumbling upon a Horcrux, created unwittingly in ages past.

In *A Game of Thrones* one of the characters muses: 'A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies...the man who never reads lives only once.' Human lives are unpredictable things, their only constant, change and finiteness. Books offer a means to forget that, to escape into other lives and skins for a brief time. And in some instances, books offer a means to reconnect with your own past lives, re-meet pieces of yourself. It's not quite immortality, but it's close enough for me.

TP

*One of Tolkien's fictional languages, spoken by some of the characters in the books and complete with its own grammar and vocabulary.

Climate crisis and the battle for imagination

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The tigress roars

There was chaos in the classroom. Uttam had taken Sara's notebook, Shweta was recovering from a fall she had had while racing to greet her friend from the neigbouring class, and Ather, in the middle of a raging discussion about his favourite football club, was shaking his fists in protest. Nobody was listening. The science teacher, half pleading and half bellowing, cried out "Students, look here! Please pay attention! There is something new and different we will think about today!" Her efforts went unrewarded.

Fortunately, Shweta, who had the easy confidence of a tigress, and deservedly, was the leader of this pack, noticed us standing in the corner of the room, trying to look as authoritative as we could. She decided it was worth figuring who we were, and took it upon herself to do the needful. With not a moment's hesitation, she roared the word "SSIIILLEENCCEEE!!" – and to great effect. There was a pause in the din. The other students looked up from their various activities, and stared at us, quite possibly, noticing us for the very first time. They seemed to share Shweta's spirit of inquiry (to know who we were), and waited for us to speak. My colleague from EkoGalaxy, Shreyas and I, grateful for this opportunity, grabbed it with both hands, and began introducing ourselves.

"Good morning students!" I said, to many bright, curious, and smiling faces, as I began talking about why we were there. "The world is changing quickly," I explained, "and with that, the climate crisis too is deepening." The students looked at me, their eyes now keen and interested. I could tell they wanted to know more and understand this better. I also knew that in that moment we had a major responsibility towards the students – to be neither too alarmist, nor overly optimistic about the health of the planet. It's a tricky balance to maintain – but an important one.

As the discussions continued, we spoke about how lucky we are to share the planet – not only with one another, but also with a rich biodiversity of plants and animals. We spoke about the interconnectedness of all species – and how the wellbeing of one affected all, and how, the inverse too, was true. The students listened, in rapt attention for the entirety of the session,

asking questions and raising concerns – and as it often happens with bright, young minds, this led to even greater interaction and discussion. We felt content with a good day's work, and revelled in the chatter of the students.

Needless to say, there was nothing new or original in what we were saying. It had been said before and better – and indeed, has been understood and lived by countless adivasi, tribal, and indigenous communities across the world. However, we also knew the simple act of communicating this well to impressionable students, was a critical, urgent act. The students were listening to these ideas and stories for the first time, and we fully recognized the importance of this moment – not only for their own sake, but also for the future of the planet – which increasingly was interlinked.

Learning to ask (ourselves) better questions

In the Indian subcontinent's philosophy, respect and reverence for the environment may be traced back several millennia. Inherent to its diverse cultures and traditions has been living in harmony with the local environment. Nature – indeed, the foundation of all life – was understood as intrinsically valuable, beyond her usefulness as a resource. For example, in many cultural practices across the country, different species were treasured as important, and the worship of tigers, water, soil, trees, snakes, monkeys, and elephants, among others, was a norm. Subcontinental art and architecture are filled with myriad animal forms, indicating their high status and regard across kingdoms and dynasties.

Indeed, in some ancient Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain scriptures, humans were considered integral, yet only a part of, the universal personality. In one such, it was said, *"The entire creation is one and indivisible and the entire universe constitutes a life unto which every aspect including the human is integrated."** In other words, a concern for, and the protection of, the environment has been an essential part of the social fabric of the subcontinent. Indeed, it may be argued that many in the region inherit a concern for the environment, by virtue of the diverse, natural, and indigenous traditions of the land.

In recent times, though, a strong case may be made for the necessity of re-thinking how we discuss the environment and climate with children, in a world where climate change requires us to re-think how humans should live and learn with the environment.

Towards this, in December 2003, the Supreme Court mandated the teaching of environmental education across all years of formal schooling. At the time, this appeared to provide an impetus in raising awareness regarding environmental concerns in India. However, in the decades that followed, significant concerns emerged. This was because environmental education curricula in schools focused on textbook learning, rather than sparking joy, curiosity, and wonder towards nature. Further, the climate crises,

*https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA268403833&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=08140626&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7Ecda45f54&aty=open+web+entry

Photos courtesy: Urvi Desai

and studies associated with it, were fast accelerating, and the school curriculum was simply not keeping up.

Most alarming of all, students have begun learning about the climate crisis from social media, which is apocalyptic, if not inaccurate, and rarely encourages any change of thought, habits, and behaviour. In other words, existing forms of climate engagement do not stimulate critical thinking among young people, or foster an informed, gentle, and harmonious relationship with the local environment, and does not encourage them to ask better question of themselves.

Imagining an alternative world

Every crisis is, at its heart, a storytelling crisis. In the case of the health of the planet, too, we are limited by the stories we tell, or do not tell. This may be because of habits of the mind, unoriginal narratives, industry propaganda, or quite simply, inconvenience. However, what this leads to, is that it prevents us from believing, seeing, acting on, or imagining, the possibilities of change. The world is rapidly spiralling – certainly the one I grew up in was very different from the one children today are growing up in. The planet is gasping for breath and there is no doubt that we need to re-imagine development, and, among other things, leave fossil fuels behind, and lower our carbon footprint – decisively.

So, what then is the relationship between hope, imagination, and crisis? What drives our cars won't change unless we change what drives our ideas. In order to do what the climate crisis demands of us, perhaps we also need to find inspired stories, compassionate local solutions, nurture curiosity, humour, and humility vis-à-vis other species, ask better questions, and become better listeners of one another and the natural world.

At its essence, this means we are in a battle for imagination – not only with large industry and shortsighted economic growth – but also with ourselves. Stories hold a critical space in our lives. They have the power to lead us to imagine a better future for us, as well as a harmonious world shared with the planet's rich biodiversity.

This said, it is also a complex space, and we need to be careful. Popular, biased, or ill-informed narratives can as easily drown out voices that aren't as loud, shrill, or industry-funded as they are. In other words, stories can as easily take away the power of curiosity, hope, tenderness, and imagination.

Therefore, rather than believe and immediately repeat what is heard or being churned out as the norm, we need to pause, think about who's telling the story, and question why. Simply put, we need to learn to be better critics of ourselves, and gentler listeners of the planet.

What constitutes a good life?

This might require a change in the relationship we've had so far with the natural world, and indeed, with ourselves. The climate crisis, and the battle for imagination, that is at the centre of it, demands that we scrutinize how we think about everything. It asks that we re-think our notions of power, wealth, time, space, joy, nature, intelligence, and value. Quite

simply, I ask – what constitutes a good life?

Working in the field of climate education, and learning from the world's most diverse, beautiful, wise, and inspired teacher – Mother Nature – has been a humbling experience. It has taught me that success can look quite different from what we may first imagine. To me, success is the moment of awe and beauty I experience when I watch a little bird build a nest in my garden. Success for me also looks like the moment when a student of EkoGalaxy sternly asks our instructors whether they drove to class or took public transport. These moments are profoundly gratifying to our team because the students' questions are not simply questions – they represent the student's new ability to think critically, question authority where required, and not the least, show an enduring compassion and consideration for the planet, in seemingly small choices of the everyday.

To parents, schools, and teachers, far from the competitive grades and examinations, I hope that success looks like a child who is comfortable with who they are, unafraid to speak their mind, on the path of good health (both body and mind), is considerate of the world around them, and most importantly, has a song in their heart. I also hope that the parents' love and schools' concern for children extend beyond just the immediate. All of us, especially those above 35 years, are deeply complicit in bringing the planet to this point. The story of climate change and its devastating effects are no longer those of the distant future.

It is critical that we recognize and grasp the seriousness of the climate crisis, and move in the direction of action in the everyday, which mitigates rather than exacerbates it. It is also time we give space to new stories and better imagination, in our homes and schools. The gap between perceived support and actual action is not to be taken lightly.

We need better stories – and often this means, stories that allow us to see clearly, think critically, and act resolutely. This includes engagement that is rooted in the local, using nuanced and diverse formats – for example, strong scientific research, but also art, music, literature, theatre, culture, outdoor activities, games, poetry, and more. The work we do at EkoGalaxy aspires to string together these very principles – and seeks to make every school, a climate school.

As someone in the field of climate education, my experience with students has been fascinating, stirring, and illuminating, often all together. However, I try to remember that the forms of storytelling we take to students are complex spaces – with the power to represent or not, and to re-imagine, or not. Indeed, whether in terms of protecting the Earth for future generations, to treat and respect our local environment as cherished national heritage, or in terms of being mindful of species of all shapes and kinds that we share home with, perhaps it is time we re-imagine the world we live in and the world we aspire to have.

In this critical battle for imagination, and in bringing climate education to students, it is important for us to seek braver, gentler, better stories, lest our children are forced to reckon with a world, they neither imagined, nor deserve.

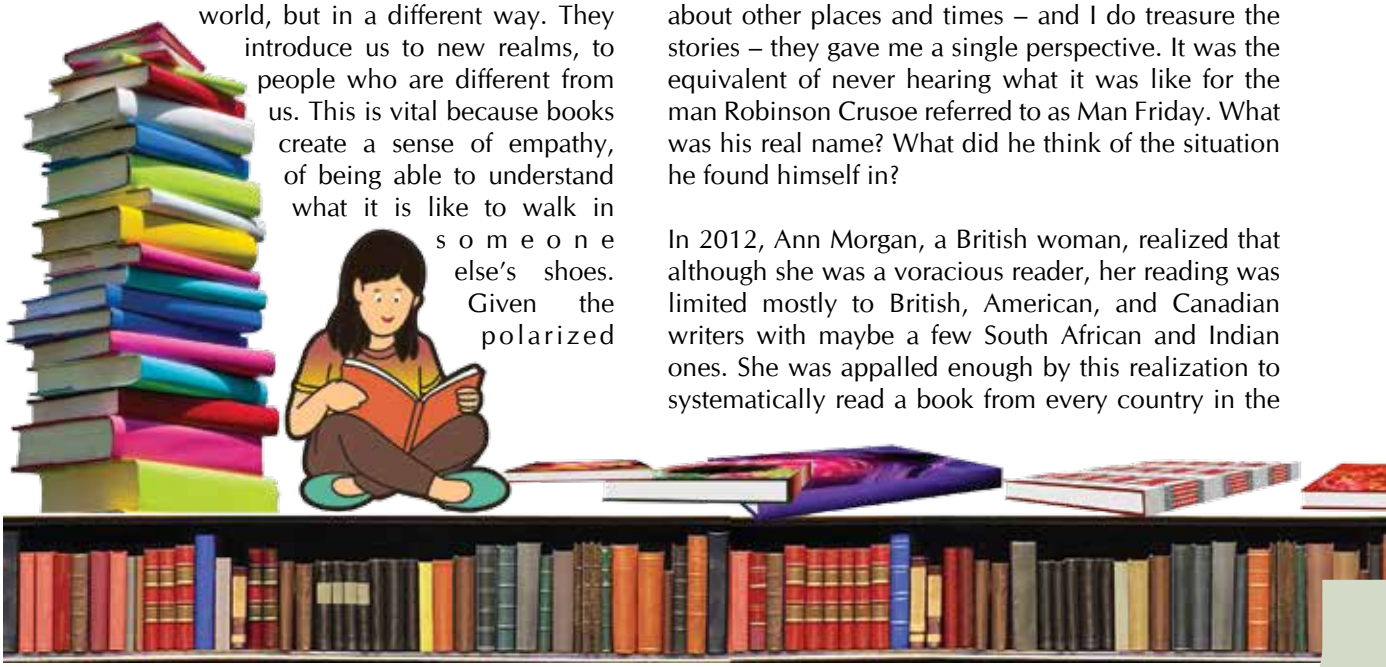
TP

Building bridges through stories

Suroor Alikhan
has worked in communications at the United Nations in Geneva and other international organizations for over three decades. She is now retired and runs a book blog called Talking About Books. Suroor also reviews travel books by women for the website Women on the Road. She can be reached at suroora@hotmail.com.

Stories are an integral part of our lives. They shape us and are the way in which we remember, turning our lives into narratives. As children, we are raised on fables and fairy tales that teach us how to navigate the world, for example, by telling us to be careful about trusting strangers.

As we get older, stories continue to teach us about the world, but in a different way. They introduce us to new realms, to people who are different from us. This is vital because books create a sense of empathy, of being able to understand what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes. Given the polarized times we live in, such stories are particularly important. They are able to forge links where none exist.



In a 2006 TED Talk, the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warned of the danger of a single story, of seeing the world through a single perspective. Like Adichie and many others, I grew up mostly on English literature – and English meant British, not literature in English. Although the books I read did teach me about other places and times – and I do treasure the stories – they gave me a single perspective. It was the equivalent of never hearing what it was like for the man Robinson Crusoe referred to as Man Friday. What was his real name? What did he think of the situation he found himself in?

In 2012, Ann Morgan, a British woman, realized that although she was a voracious reader, her reading was limited mostly to British, American, and Canadian writers with maybe a few South African and Indian ones. She was appalled enough by this realization to systematically read a book from every country in the

world, something she continues to do. It changed her profoundly.

I had started on a similar journey many years ago, but fairly sporadically; for example, by buying a book from a country I visited. But that left out large parts of the world, places I knew very little about. Inspired by Ann's example, a friend suggested we take up her challenge, and so a group of us set out to read the world. Parallel to the group challenge, I also set myself a similar one.

I began by drawing up a list of countries, basing it on the United Nations member states, and adding Taiwan (a country not recognized by the UN), Palestine, Tibet, and Western Sahara, and splitting up the UK into its four constituent parts to make it more interesting. Books could include any genre. The only rule I set was that the author had to be from the country.

The next step was to find the books. For some countries, I was spoiled for choice, while for others, I had to do a bit of research online, and find books that were actually available. I am limited by the fact that I do not read e-books, but on the other hand, I do occasionally read in French and Spanish, which has helped. Social media was also useful: a fellow bibliophile from Grenada I "met" on Twitter suggested Jacob Ross, a Grenadian writer, and Cherie Jones, a writer from Barbados.

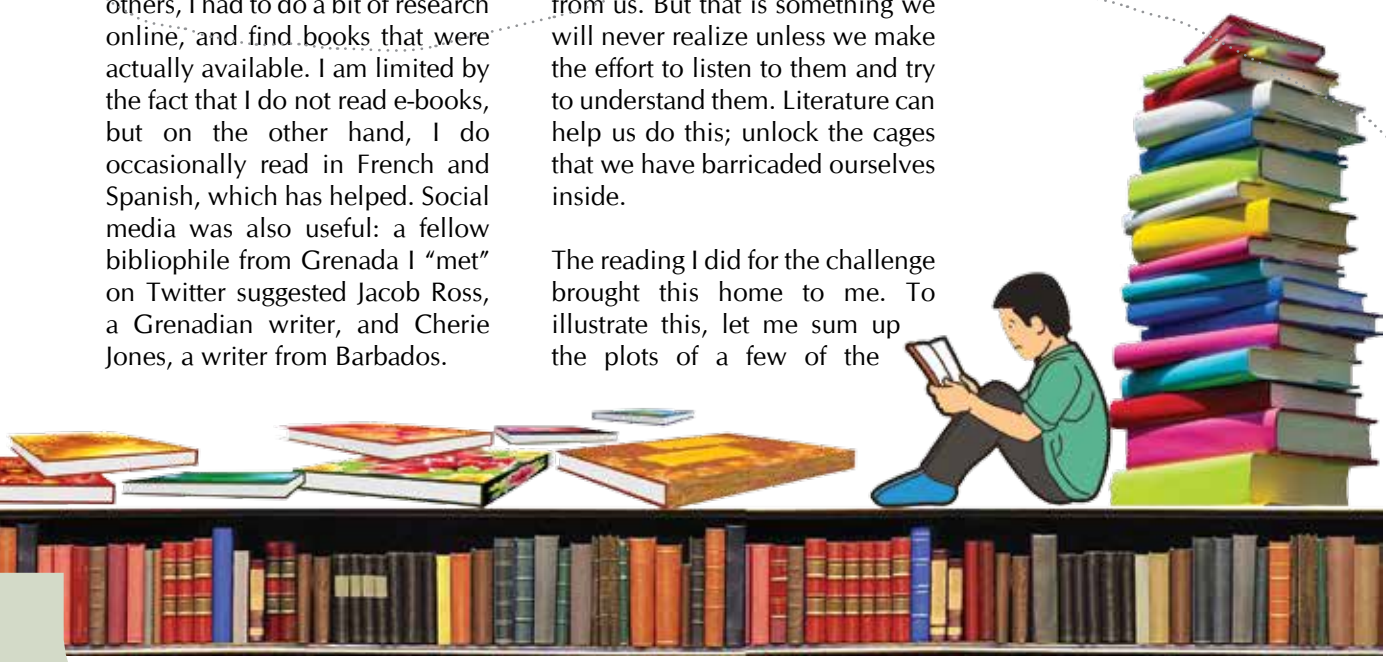
The result has been eye-opening and extremely rewarding. I became a part of lives that I would otherwise know nothing about. How else would I have learned what it is like to be a young Bedouin girl in Mauritania looking for her illegitimate child (Mbarek Ould Beyrouk's *The Desert and the Drum*), or a slave woman in Jamaica in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*)? I read about the lives of people in Madagascar (Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Fields*) and Samoa (Albert Wendt's *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*) and their history. The countries I have read about are no longer strange and unknown places. I may only know a little about them, but through my reading, they have ceased to be unfamiliar.

This is particularly important in the world we live in today, a world where we point fingers at the "other", dismissing them and their concerns, a world in which we are entrenched in the "rightness" of our own beliefs. The truth is that the "other" is not so different from us. But that is something we will never realize unless we make the effort to listen to them and try to understand them. Literature can help us do this; unlock the cages that we have barricaded ourselves inside.

The reading I did for the challenge brought this home to me. To illustrate this, let me sum up the plots of a few of the books I read in single sentences. A woman tries to build bridges with her estranged son. A young boy goes looking for his missing older brother. Two widows have to stave off their greedy relatives. An old woman fights a legal battle for her land.

Reducing the books to their basic plots reveals their common humanity. These are universal stories. But these particular stories come from all over the world: the woman trying to reach her son lives in Trinidad (Ingrid Persaud's *Love After Love*); the young boy is travelling around Brunei, looking for his brother (K.H. Lim's *Written in Black*); the two widows live in a village in the Central African Republic (Adrienne Yabouza's *Co-Wives, Co-Widows*); and the woman fighting for her land is from Caracas, Venezuela, in the 1700s (Ana Teresa Torres's *Doña Inés Versus Oblivion*).

As I said, these are universal stories, but the books are set firmly in a particular time and place. By drawing us into the lives of these people, they point



out the commonalities as well as the differences between us; and because we acknowledge the commonalities, we also accept the differences.

Reading the world has also given me different perspectives on stories I thought I knew. By narrating the Spanish conquest of the Americas from the point of view of a Moroccan slave, Laila Lalami provides a narrative that is different to the one we may be familiar with (*The Moor's Account*). Or take a story set in a *basti* near Mumbai, places that most of us are familiar with in a superficial way. Deepa Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* takes us into the lives of the children of the *basti* and gives us a real sense of how they live.

I believe the sooner we can introduce children or young people to literature, the better; especially literature that centres on a place, a community, or written in a language that is unfamiliar to them. Although we live in a world that seems to reject differences, the fact is that we are also seeing more translated literature than ever before, especially into English – whether from foreign or Indian languages – as well as more small publishers that bring out books that might not be taken up by the larger ones. There is more diversity in the sort of books we are exposed to.

There are many ways to take advantage of this. Classes in literature are an obvious one, but also, why not tie literature with geography? Pick a country or place that the children are studying and assign them a book from that place. There are all kinds of genres to choose from, whether it is literature, poetry, or even non-fiction, for example, memoirs.

We are shaped by what we read. We may be given books by our parents or friends, but the books that we are assigned in the classroom are the ones that we study in detail, and read over and over again. These are the books that often stay with us and if we're lucky, start us on a path of reading. Which is why it is vital that children are exposed to diverse narratives in class.

There are some useful websites that can help in finding books and authors from around the world. For example, Words Without Borders (wordswithoutborders.org), World Literature Today (www.worldliteraturetoday.org), Ann Morgan's blog, A Year of Reading the World (ayearofreadingtheworld.com) and my own blog, Talking About Books (talking-about-books.com), where you can find write-ups about all the books I have mentioned here.

I have always felt that the greatest gift you can give a child is the gift of reading, and the more varied the readings are, the better. They open up the child's mind to infinite possibilities, helping them understand the world better, and creating a sense of tolerance and empathy.

And in today's world, we need that space – the quiet thoughtfulness and open-mindedness you can get through a book. We need to be building bridges, not walls. And books are a wonderful and accessible way of doing that.

TP

An entry to other worlds

Jamuna Inamdar
is the co-founder of Aripana Foundation, an NGO working for the past six and half years in the Mithila region of North Bihar to improve the quality of education in underserved government schools. With 15+ years in education, her core areas of work are strengthening environment education in schools, making libraries a central part of children's education, art in education, and early childhood care and education. Jamuna also runs the Greenwood Learning Centre in Bangalore that has a preschool, a library, and several after-school programs for children aged 7 to 15 yrs. She can be reached at jamuna.inamdar@aripanafoundation.org.

"Literature plays a crucial role as both a mirror and a window to the worlds in which children live and are expected to take their place." (Galda, 1998).

This quote unfailingly reminds us of the power of stories and books and the role they play in enriching readers' lives! Literature introduces readers to not just stories, but also ideas and issues related to their own lives as well as to lives and worlds they haven't as yet seen. It makes available to them the collective knowledge about how individuals and communities have understood themselves and their relationships with each other and with nature. Through it, readers also understand the elements of stories like plot, characters, theme, setting, values, and language use.

While the role literature plays in readers' lives is well-established and even acknowledged, the creation of and access to good quality literature, especially in local languages that readers speak and understand foremost, is disproportionately low. In India, 45% of the literature published for

Photos courtesy: Jamuna Inamdar

Building digital tools & technologies in Maithili

children is in English, 25% is in Hindi and a mere 30% is in the hundreds of local Indian languages! Additionally, only 26% of the overall literature published is for children aged 0-6 years, making it the most neglected group by publishers. (Parag, A Tata Trust's Initiative). This dearth of reading material in local languages holds back 40% of students globally from gaining education in a language that is familiar to them. Lack of linguistic diversity in children's books is a serious concern at present. (Purvi Shah, Director, Storyweaver, Pratham Books)

Determined to do something about this dismal state of children's literature in local and underserved languages of India, we, the team members of Aripana Foundation embarked upon strengthening Maithili in primary education, and doing so first and foremost by creating quality literature for children in Maithili – the mother language of thousands of children of Mithila, foremost on many a child's tongue, yet struggling against other social and politically dominant languages.

Maithili is recognized as one of the official languages of India as per the 8th Schedule to the Indian Constitution. Despite this, in the state of Bihar, in which the Mithila region is located and a large number of Maithili speakers reside, Maithili does not enjoy the status of an official language. It is absent from children's schooling and educational experience, the repercussions of which are serious. Younger generations, deprived of an academic, creative, enriching engagement with the language, coupled with very little exposure to literature and educational material therein, remain only remotely aware of the history and linguistic uniqueness of Maithili and the treasure trove of literature created by literary greats. Maithili literature too, like any other, offers its children a window and a mirror, with which children can know the world around them and themselves, better, in a language that is their mother language, the one they speak and understand before any other! No other language, no matter how widely prevalent and influential, can replace the experience Maithili can provide to Maithil children. Presently, there's very little opportunity or space for young, budding minds to learn, understand, experience the language, in turn nurturing pride in their minds towards the language and culture.

At the present rate, without thoughtful intervention, younger generations might completely lose touch with the language. Not very many individuals will know it enough to become creators of literature in Maithili and not many will learn to be readers either!

This context and challenges therein, helped set goals for the project. Right from the start, the project proposed to address more than just the dearth of good quality books in Maithili for early readers and young children. An equally important goal of this project was to encourage community participation and enhance community awareness towards the revival of Maithili. Additionally, the project was also designed to include translations of some of the choicest works in children's literature from across the world, into Maithili.

The project was launched in August 2018. Through word-of-mouth and with help from social media, team Aripana sent out a call to interested volunteers from the Maithil community to join this mission of creating quality literature for children in Maithili. The response was heartening, with Maithili speaking individuals from across India, and not just Mithila, joining the group of volunteers, and thus began the journey of creating children's literature in Maithili. Our partnership with

Pratham Books' Storyweaver* gave it the much needed impetus.

When team Aripana started work in the area of children's literature in 2018, Storyweaver had roughly 20,000 stories in 220 languages except Maithili. Not a single story existed on this beautiful, resourceful, contemporary, open-source platform that was becoming a popular place for parents, educators, writers, translators, and illustrators to come together to weave new stories for children and help create a pathway to nurture the next generation of readers.

The team of volunteers at Aripana, chose some of the popular, beautifully illustrated and delightfully crafted children's books from the Storyweaver platform, to translate into Maithili. By December 2019, the team had created 26 English-Maithili (bilingual) and Maithili books that were made available to readers through multiple channels – through Aripana's intervention in government primary schools of Mithila (its library program and its program to strengthen mother-language, Maithili, in primary education), through a one of its kind online store of Maithili books, by attending literature festivals, and other community organized cultural events. Attendance at these festivals and cultural events served more than one goal. It not only helped create awareness about this community-driven project, encouraging other interested individuals to join this mission but also got us valuable feedback from people who started reading the books, helping us on this journey! The team was pleased to introduce audio-visual versions of the Maithili books, on the organizational YouTube channel through a special playlist. Aripana was able to reach more than a 1000 children through various festivals, gatherings, digital media, and school collaborations.

The approach adopted by Aripana for the creation of children's literature in Maithili involved collaborating and co-creating books with the community. This approach necessitated capacity building of the volunteers especially around the nature of children's literature, writing for children, nuances of the Maithili language and a basic know-how about the translation process. Mid-way through the journey of creating delightful books for children in Maithili, the team decided to pause, reflect, and take stock of the ground covered, the challenges faced, and the support required. The result of this was a webinar organized by Aripana Foundation, with the renowned Maithil author, recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Shri Pradip Bihari Ji as the chief speaker. An immensely rich talk materialized that touched upon,

- general principles to keep in mind when writing for children
- norms of and common errors in Maithili writing/ translation
- arriving at a common understanding within the team regarding usage of certain terms, words, standard spellings, etc.

In February 2020, Google supported six Artificial Intelligence (AI) research projects in India that would focus on addressing social, humanitarian, and environmental challenges in sectors like healthcare, education, disaster prevention, etc. One of the teams supported by Google was

*Launched by the renowned NGO Pratham Books, Storyweaver is a one of its kind, digital, open-license platform that is a storehouse of close to 33,000 stories in about 280 Indian languages – Tamil, Marathi, Kannada, Bengali, Assamese, Odiya, Telugu, Gondi, Konkani, and many many more!

AI4Bharat (an IIT Madras based platform building AI solutions for problems relevant to India) along with non-profit Storyweaver to build open-source input tools for underserved Indian languages to accelerate publishing of openly licensed content.

Aripana Foundation joined hands with Google, AI4Bharat, and Pratham Books' StoryWeaver in this project by sharing its expertise in the Maithili language and helping build a Maithili input tool, now integrated and available on StoryWeaver's desktop and mobile interfaces.

For this purpose, Aripana Foundation once again pooled in the knowledge and expertise of members from the Maithil community by inviting them to volunteer for the project. The volunteers not only helped in annotating more than 40,000 words in Maithili but also supported AI4Bharat and StoryWeaver during the testing of the input tool before it was made available on the StoryWeaver platform.

India has over 75 crore people using the internet, a significant proportion of Indian users are using it across low friction verticals such as entertainment, news, messaging, and social media. Of the various barriers that prevent these users from engaging with more verticals and availing more services, one of the biggest is that content is available mainly in English. While India is a country with great linguistic diversity, much of the information and access to internet, e-governance, ecommerce, e-banking services cannot be used by the majority of the population. The internet today is severely deficient in terms of content in Indian languages. In fact, 53% of non-internet owners in India state that they will start using the internet if it has content available in their mother languages. Therefore, in India's new and emerging digital ecosystems, novel ways to engage with citizens who communicate in varied languages and dialects must be found. The objective is to make information available to the people in their native language in order to be a truly connected nation.

A key factor in building solutions is improving accessibility to multilingual data. Progress in Indian language technologies has been hampered due to the lack of availability of large amounts of high quality datasets to train state-of-the-art AI models. Curated and validated contributions are urgently required so that these can go into an open source repository, where it can be harnessed and put to use by the entire ecosystem.

Aripana Foundation is working in collaboration with Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Madras, to build high quality datasets in Maithili, which will be used to train state-of-the-art AI models and develop automatic speech recognition, text to speech synthesis, machine translation, optical character recognition (OCR), and related technologies in Maithili. This, in turn, will enable the development of various applications for the public and private sector, NGOs, and other end-users.

In order to fulfill the goal of making digital services on the internet available to the common man in his/her mother language, Maithili, team Aripana took the first step and commenced the digitization of Maithili content contributing to the building of high quality datasets in the

language. For this, the team spent significant time sourcing high quality digital content in source (English) and target (Maithili) languages. Due to paucity of large databases of digital content in Maithili, team Aripana started creating a digital database of 1.25 lakh Maithili sentences. Great care was taken to ensure that the corpus of Maithili sentences that comprised the database was representative, i.e., various subjects were included such as science, sports, politics, history, etc. Various forms such as fiction, autobiographies, travelogues, etc., by various authors in multiple dialects were included. A comprehensive list of 700 to 800 books was prepared, out of which 400 books were shortlisted that fulfilled the above criteria. Small sections of the selected books were then digitized and proofread resulting in the creation of perhaps the largest, most diverse high quality dataset of digital content in Maithili. A team of translators was recruited in order to translate English text into Maithili to create parallel translated datasets to be used subsequently for machine translation models across 22 Indian languages.

With expert reviewers now part of the team, Hindi to Maithili translators were also added and with a strength of over 15 translators and reviewers, the team translated 60,000 plus sentences from English and Hindi into Maithili and are on track to translate 1 lakh more sentences in the coming months. As part of the same project, team Aripana embarked on the next task of Speech Data Collection for the collection of speech data in Maithili from 10 districts of Mithila in order to capture various dialects / variations of the spoken language with the aim of creating one of the largest Maithili audio databases. Team Aripana has so far successfully visited four districts of Mithila, some of them being Darbhanga, Madhubani, Saharsa, and Supaul, resulting in the collection of over 678 hours of speech / audio data.

Alongside this, a dedicated team of transcribers is in the process of transcribing the collected speech data. This data along with transcriptions will subsequently be used to create text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and similar other applications in Maithili, for the first time.

In India's new and emerging digital ecosystems, we are reaching citizens who primarily communicate in Maithili while the overall project (Project Bhashini by Government of India) aims to do that with citizens using varied Indian languages and dialects. The objective is to make information available to the people in their native language in order to be a "truly" connected nation.

We hope that Aripana Foundation's work in building digital tools and technologies in Maithili will enable the development of various applications for the public and private sector, NGOs, and the end-user. This will result in the creation of a knowledge based society where information is freely and readily available and especially in a language the end user understands and connects to the most.

TP

Exploring Arunachal Pradesh through prose and poetry

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Surrounded by the Himalayan mountains in the north and the plains of the Brahmaputra in the south, Arunachal Pradesh is a land of exuberant forests, mountains, hills, valleys, streams, and rivers. It is the first region to witnesses sunrise in the country. The 26 districts of Arunachal Pradesh are home to many indigenous tribes, each having its own culture and language. The spectacular natural surroundings and its large ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity make Arunachal Pradesh stand out amongst the seven states of the Northeast. But for a long time Arunachal Pradesh remained isolated from the rest of the country due to policies under the British Raj and its

Ziro Valley, Arunachal Pradesh
Courtesy: www.commons.wikimedia.org

complex geographical terrain. Added to this was the absence of the written word – a script, which became another barrier to communication with the rest of the country. The Arunachalis used to express themselves orally in their indigenous tongues, which was beyond the comprehension and reach of people outside its linguistic frontier. (The Monpa and Khampti tribes do have scripts, but all other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh belong to the preliterate society). Besides, the differences in culture, language, faith, social and physical features, and traditional practices from the rest of the country are also reasons that led to the region's seclusion. Jamuna Bini, a distinguished poet from Arunachal Pradesh, expresses this socio-political dissonance in a poem:

Arunachal!
your history
is full of pain
and neglect.
First,
the British government
and
after freedom,
your own government also
ignored you.

(From the poem *Arunachal* translated from Hindi into English by Santosh Kumar Sonker)

To bridge this gap, Arunachali writers started writing on ethnicity, culture, tradition, history, myths, and legends, providing an alternate source to understand Arunachal Pradesh and its culture. The prose and poetry from Arunachal Pradesh along with describing the beauty of the land also speak of cultural psychology, the traditional mind, and social reality of the region.

Writers draw inspiration from their interaction with social, economic, cultural, and political situations. Hence, literature cannot be understood in isolation. Lummer Dai, Yeshi Dorjee Thongchi, Mamang Dai, Yumlam Tana, Taro Sindik, Jamuna Bini, Gumlat Maio, L W Bapu, Nending Ommo, Doyir Ete, Ponung Ering, Joram Yalam, Bompi Riba, and Henkar Rokom Bado are prolific literary figures of Arunachal Pradesh. By intricately intertwining folk tradition with themes such as the relationship between modernity and tradition, individuality and collectiveness, past and present, politics and development, these writers sketched the cultural milieu and truth of the time. Their works extol and enliven the traditional and cultural life of Arunachal Pradesh.

It is said that to understand a culture one should study its literature. Literature is defined as a "mirror to society" for its ability to portray an authentic picture of the society. Lummer Dai's first novel *Paharar Xile Xile* (1961) is considered to be the first novel from Arunachal Pradesh by an Arunachali. Belonging to the Adi tribe, his works revolve around the culture, tradition, laws, beliefs, values, faith, and myths of the Adi community.

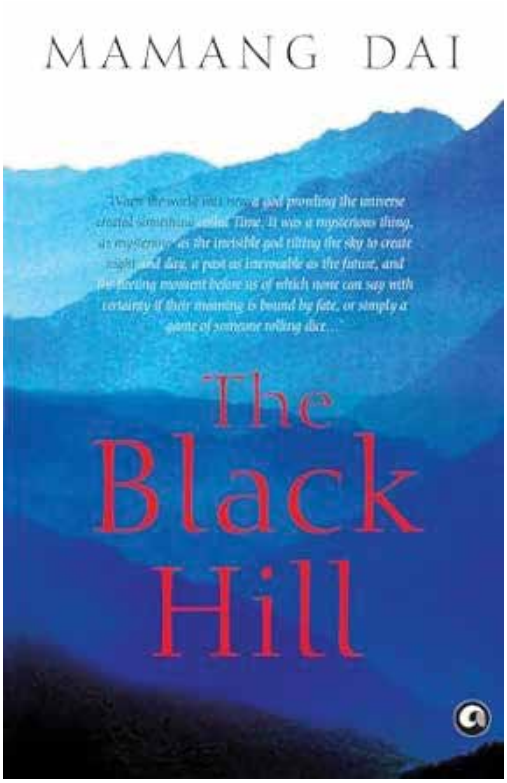
When Dai started his literary career, it was the time immediately after independence. Arunachal was going through a social, cultural, and political transformation. Development, especially in the field of education, significantly affected the language and literature of Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachali tribes have a large repository of oral literature in their respective languages. With the introduction of proper education after independence, the culture of reading and writing began to take shape in the state. The oral literature was translated and integrated into written. Thus, the discourse of modern literature in Arunachal Pradesh began in the mid-20th century. Initially, Assamese literature had a major influence on the writers of Arunachal Pradesh. This is because during this period, Arunachal Pradesh (then known as the North East Frontier Agency, NEFA) was under the province of Assam. So the medium of instruction in educational institutions in Arunachal Pradesh was Assamese. This is why literary works produced by writers of this era are in the Assamese language. However, after the language policy of 1972, Assamese was replaced by Hindi and English as the medium of instruction in educational institutes in Arunachal Pradesh. This acceleration in the field of education brought intellectual revival and progressive spirit among the people, which led to the discarding of long conventional practices such as the slavery system, child marriage, exchange of bride price, and so on. In the widespread enthusiasm for social change, Lummer Dai made a deliberate effort to spread awareness to reform the

society. He used his works as a platform to campaign for social change. He dared to discuss the harmful traditional practices of his community. His novel *Paharar Xile Xile* (1961) depicted the Arunachali society of the 50s, when slavery was still prevalent in traditional Adi society. In *Kunyar Mulya* (1978) translated into English as *Bride Price*, Dai unveils the noxious social practice of child marriage. Dai's last novel *Upar Mahal* was written in the year 2003, 16 years after Arunachal Pradesh attained statehood. The novel portrays the spirit and psyche of the evolving Arunachali society due to the changing socio-political situation in the state.

Yeshi Dorjee Thongchi, a contemporary of Lummer Dai, is another important novelist from Arunachal Pradesh. He is the first Arunachali writer to receive the Sahitya Akademi award, in 2005, for his renowned work in Assamese, *Mouno Ounth Mukhar Hriday*. He was also a recipient of the Padma Shri in 2020. He retired as the State Chief Information Commissioner. This position gave him the opportunity to observe various tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh closely. His understanding and keen observation of the tribal way of life are reflected in the vivid portrayal of the different tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh in his novels. His works are a repository of the traditional and cultural life of the Sherdukpen, Monpa, Brokpa, Nyishi, and Pangchenpa tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. His first novel *Sonam* (1981) presents the lifestyle, customs, and practice of the polyandry system of the Brokpa community. His other novel, *Mouno Ounth Mukhar Hriday* (2001) tells the story of the Arunachal Pradesh of 1957-58, when it was known as NEFA. The novel describes the experience of the construction of the first road in Arunachal Pradesh. It also has interesting anecdotes of the experiences of the naive tribals during the 50s when they first encountered motor vehicles and experienced monetization due to the advancements made by road connectivity. The novel *Sava Kota Manuh* (2004) is based on the unique age-old Monpa religious ritual of disposing of dead bodies by chopping them into 108 pieces, a number equal to the beads in a rosary for Buddhist prayers. The chopped pieces are then thrown into a river for aquatic animals to eat.

Arunachali society is still in a state of transformation. It is moving from the old order and embracing new ways. Over the past decades, the state has experienced significant material developments, as well as integration and assimilation into the mainstream due to political and administrative attention. However, these developments have contributed only to partial positive outcomes. This exposure has also brought on racial discrimination and cultural prejudice. Twenty year old Nido Tania, a student from Arunachal Pradesh was murdered in Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi in 2014 after an argument broke out between him and the accused perpetrators, who commented on his hair and ethnic origin. This is not a lone case of unjust treatment faced by the tribals of the Northeast in other parts of the country. Also, the changing paradigm in socio-cultural and political structure has disrupted unity and peace in the state. Political rivalries, easy money, corruption, ethnic conflicts, aspiration for power, drug menace, etc., have led to the emergence of insurgency, disintegration, inequality, and annihilation of nature. Meanwhile, reeling under the influence of modernization, traditional culture is losing its significance. The changing equilibrium has resulted in cultural amnesia and identity crises among the younger generation.

All these experiences have driven people to critically reflect on their history and heritage. This phenomenon generated a group of writers who started writing for their ethnic identity, culture, and history. They explored subjects like history, folklore, social system, culture, and tradition to establish a better understanding as well as to preserve it. They integrated elements from oral literature into their writings to represent the larger reality of the Arunachali way of life.



A poet turned novelist, Mamang Dai is the first woman writer from Arunachal Pradesh. She is a recipient of the Padma Shree Award, 2011 and Sahitya Akademi Award, 2017. Engaging in factual history and oral memories, Dai has re-created the pre-colonial and colonial history of Arunachal Pradesh in her fiction and poetry. Her novels are often set against the backdrop of important historical events that changed the socio-political narrative of the state. She reconstructed history to present an insider perspective of the landmark events of the region. Her novels enhance an understanding of the historic past and political realities of Arunachal Pradesh. In *The Black Hill* (2014), Dai vividly presented the saga of the death of a Jesuit priest, Father Krick, whose murder brought the expansion of imperialism to the Frontier tract. In *Escaping the Land* (2021), Dai explores the cause and consequence of the murder of British political officer Noel Williamson by the Adi tribe at Komsing village in 1911 and Aching Mori in 1953, where 47 Indian government officials were killed by the Tagin tribe. The novel is also an elaborate narration of the political, social, and cultural history of Arunachal Pradesh.

Another significant characteristic of Dai's writing is that she often incorporates elements of folklore in her narratives, providing readers with a deeper appreciation and understanding of Arunachal's rich cultural heritage. Dai diligently reconstructed oral narratives in her novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). The novel imbibes the tribal philosophy that leads humanity forward and gives an identity to the animistic faith of the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh.

Nature is the core of the existence of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They find the meaning of their existence and faith in nature. Dai's poems are representation of hills, forests, mountains, rivers, and the belief and faith of her land and people. In her poetry she stays in old memories to sing the glory of myths and legends and retells the long-forgotten past.

Jumsi Siram is the first Hindi writer from Arunachal Pradesh. Like his contemporary Mamang Dai, he also explores historical subjects in his writings. In *Matmur Jamoh Gumnam Swantantri Senani* (2015) Siram has fictionalized the murder of British officer Noel Williamson at Komsing village, which led to the Anglo-Abor War of 1911. The novel is a retelling of the genesis of the incident from the perspective of Arunachalis.

The fictional world of the writers from Arunachal is filled with agonizing experiences of identity crisis, corruption in public life, and bucolic nostalgia. Their works are so proximate to the social reality that they can be viewed as an astute portrayal of prevailing political anxiety, fear, insecurity, and aspirations in the region.

To address the issues of discrimination and prejudice, which are the results of cultural ignorance and awareness, the writers creatively involved oral literature with modern literary genres. This sensitive blending with the setting in the indigenous ambience conveys the cultural and traditional interior of Arunachal Pradesh. At the same time, it also opens a way of negotiation through literature to develop a bond of affinity with the rest of the nation. Therefore, with stories and poems, the writers from Arunachal Pradesh entreat empathy, equality, acceptance, and solidarity to live in harmony amidst diversity.

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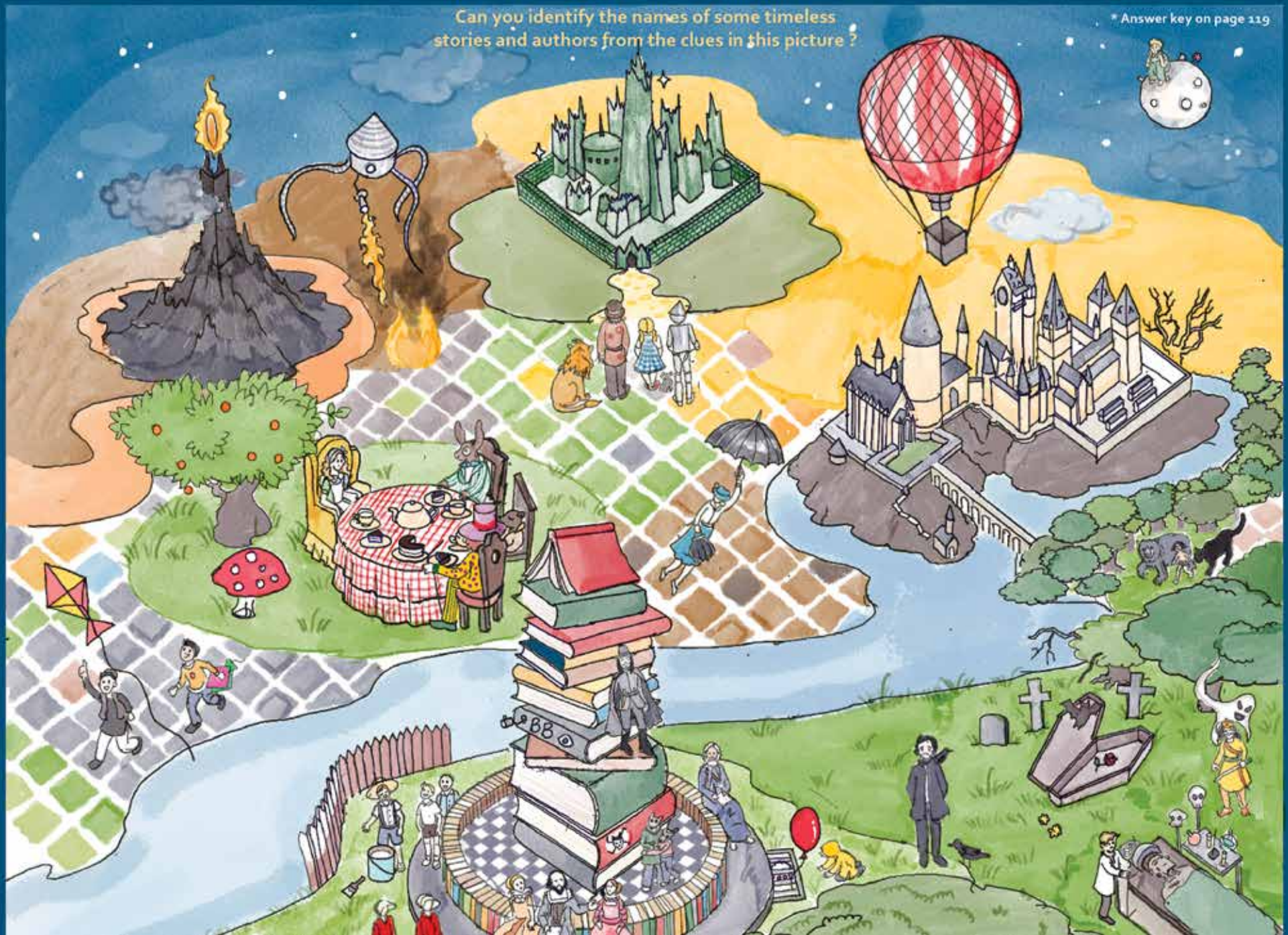
Designed and illustrated by
Jisha Unnikrishnan

A LAND OF STORIES

Can you identify the names of some timeless stories and authors from the clues in this picture ?

* Answer key on page 119



Teenagers and the Bard

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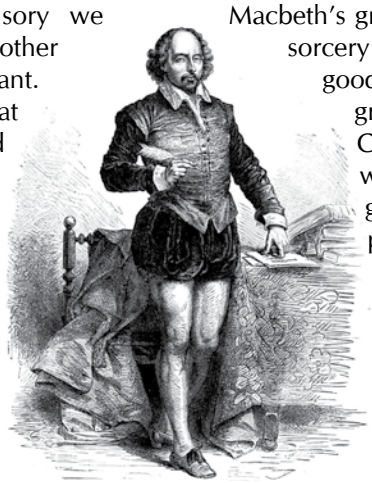
Many arguments have been made by teachers, students, and parents to suggest that the works of William Shakespeare are not relevant to the lives of young people today. It is often said that the compulsory study of Shakespeare in schools risks alienating students who come from varying ethnic backgrounds. In India, the CISCE (Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination) Board prescribes Shakespeare at both the class 10 and class 12 level.

Some post-colonial theorists believe that Shakespeare was introduced in education to both civilize brown and black peoples in the colonial world and to devalue indigenous literature. Thus, making Shakespeare a tool to prove the cultural superiority of the British Empire. Others, including some school teachers believe that by making Shakespeare compulsory we unknowingly promote the notion that other cultural perspectives are less important. More pedantic observations suggest that Shakespeare's language is confusing, old and obsolete, too difficult for the modern teenager to absorb and articulate.

These are arguments that hold merit, but it cannot be overlooked that the themes and ideas that run through Shakespeare's works are universal, surpassing barriers of race and class. In this sense his plays are as relevant today as on the day they were written.



The themes that run through his works are those of jealousy, anger, despair, love, hate, fear, contempt, courage – common to all regardless of race and ethnicity. Falling madly in love, feeling isolated and alienated from loved ones, agonizing about the future, are feelings many adolescents and adults are likely to experience several times over in their lives.

Jessica's elopement with the Christian Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice* speaks not only of the deep love she feels for Lorenzo but also of her desire to be an 'accepted' Christian rather than an 'outcast' Jew, a reminder to most young people in our country of the complexity of inter-faith and inter-caste marriages. She desires also to rebelliously break away from a difficult father, a thought not alien perhaps to many a teenager today as well as in Shakespeare's time.

Macbeth's greed for power and his faith in the evil sorcery of the witches is a story of the fall of a good man who forgets his goodness once his greed for power is stoked. The hubris of Caesar can be easily connected to rulers who might lose touch with reality and govern with the belief of impregnable power only to be overthrown.

Arguing about the reasons why Antonio might be ready to sacrifice his life for Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* has led to much discussion on the sexuality of the two men. Portia's speech on the dazzling light

of the sun overpowering the tiny flame of the candle reminds many teenagers of how the strength of a woman can go unrecognized in what is regrettably a man's world. Portia's role may have been that of the eloquent lawyer who wins in court but she must now surrender herself to Bassanio her so-called 'lord, governor and king'. Rosalind of *As You Like It* and Portia of *The Merchant* appear like early feminists to the young and they are admired by most young people for their intellect, wit, and ability to protect themselves and their loved ones. They also conduct their romances on their own terms, which is endearing to most young people. Adolescents are quick to point out that Bassanio seems to be a greedy and corrupt Lothario who marries Portia only for her money. Portia's betrothal ring is used intelligently by her to become the bargaining chip that prevents her from losing out in this relationship. The themes that Shakespeare writes about have helped many a teenager mull over their own feminism learning from the charming and intelligent Portia or Rosalind. The fact that most of the heroines were men in women's attire gives room for the exploration of diverse gender roles.

None of these themes are outdated or obsolete. They are relevant and help form a young person's opinions and give words to their opinions. The world has changed immensely from Shakespeare's time, but the nature of the human experience remains more or less unchanged, linking the themes of his time to the themes of today. Talking about characters, discussing their motives and even performing the parts leads to critical thinking, creativity, and honing of acting skills.

Shakespeare's was the language of the Elizabethan street as much as it was of the nobles and it is up to us, the teachers, to make his language commonplace.

It was Greek to me – Julius Caesar Act 1, Sc 2
Jealousy is the green-eyed monster – Othello Act 3, Sc 3
Melted into thin air – The Tempest Act 4, Sc 1

Users of the English language quote him every day when they use common phrases such as those mentioned above. As students quote and read aloud, memorize and familiarize themselves with the Shakespearean text, they take pleasure in the meter, the rhyme, and the rhythm. The iambic pentameter becomes a part of their consciousness as it is meant to, like the beating of the heart – ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum….

Photo courtesy: www.clipart.com

In sooth I know not why I am so sad
It wearies me you say it wearies you. – The Merchant of Venice

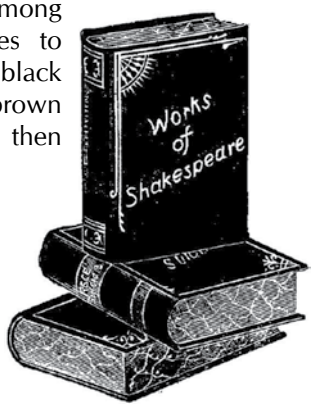
Or

Hence Home you idle creatures get you home – Julius Caesar

The lyricism of this simple yet glorious poetry can wash over them as they listen and try out these rhythmic lines tapping out the beat on their desks, rapping, or beat-boxing. Truly, what words could ever be used to replace Lady Macbeth's anguish when she washes her hands obsessively and cries out that 'all the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten' her 'little hand' that has abetted a heinous and unforgivable crime.

The amount of popular cinema and drama Shakespeare has inspired is testament to his versatility and relevance in the modern day. The series of *Star Wars* written in Shakespearean blank verse is hugely popular and widely read. The Weird Sisters in Harry Potter, *The Lion King* loosely based on Hamlet, and closer home, *Omkara* on Othello, *Angoor* on The Comedy of Errors and *Maqbool* on Macbeth are all witness to the fact that Shakespeare can be adapted and owned.

If one agrees with the view that Shakespeare was introduced in curricula among the colonies to civilize black and brown people, it then becomes necessary to supplement the reading of Shakespeare with other indigenous writings on race and culture. Perhaps Othello can be approached from the lens of James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and other similar writers. In his essay *Stranger in the Village*, Baldwin writes about how as an African American in an isolated Swiss village, he experienced racism both blatant and unintentional, much like Othello who is called a Moor and driven to insanity by his peers because he loves a white woman. Morrison's Desdemona is a feminist take on the heroine of Othello addressing Desdemona's courage, struggles, loves, tragedies, and disappointments.



The Tempest is often seen as a play about colonization, however the colonized Caliban is anything but silent throughout the play; when taunted by Prospero and Miranda, Caliban taunts back: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language." Caliban the symbol of the colonized people or the oppressed everywhere shows his grit and desire to rebel in the face of grave danger. "No more dams I'll make for fish / Nor fetch in firing at requiring / Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish / Ban' ban' Ca-Caliban has a new master, get a new man. Freedom, high-day, high-day, freedom, freedom high-day; freedom."

Rather than Shakespeare being irrelevant, it is outdated teaching practices that limit the benefits of Shakespeare. There are a range of creative approaches to the teaching and learning of Shakespeare which possess the potential to significantly increase student engagement. Pedagogical methods must give room for more innovative, diverse, and nuanced ideas. A scene could be performed with different interpretations instead of merely looking for the meaning of words which can limit the experience greatly.

For e.g., Kate's lines in *The Taming of the Shrew* V, Sc ii, 152 ....

Thy husband is thy Lord, thy life, thy keeper
Thy head, thy sovereign
One that cares for thee
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labour both by sea and land...

These lines may be recited in a mocking manner that indicates a woman's sense of self-worth and her refusal to submit to her husband's authority. On the other hand, 'a dutiful wife' may recite the lines in a subdued tone. Narrated one after the other the two recitals can highlight two different interpretations of the same text. Such experiments with the lines in Shakespeare help students form their own interpretations and reach the understanding that life can never be black or white, it is mostly grey. Shakespeare asks the questions but provides no answers. It is for us to find our own answers.

Shakespeare deals with what it is to be human and with the lives of ordinary people. His characters still resonate among the young and the old, his language still startles and moves. Each play holds a chain of myths, parables, history which link us from present to remote past. The Bard's magic remains irresistible.

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Literature in high school

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Engaging high school students in the study of literature is often a challenge. At that stage of school education, there is a sense of rushing towards an end. Students, their guardians, as well as the school administration, often seem to be preoccupied with ensuring admission into a prestigious college or university. Almost all entrance exams, at least in the Indian context, seem to be science oriented for entry into degree courses in engineering and medicine. Entry into other (non-professional) degree programs, whether in the sciences, the humanities, or commerce, does not generally require candidates to pass an entrance exam. With this background then, it is not surprising that high school students are distracted and sometimes even actively discouraged from engaging intellectually in the humanities and the arts during those concluding years.

An educated individual is not merely a literate person with laboratory and computational skills. The study of literature is not just for mere entertainment.

Quality education should foster a mind capable of reflection – with an awareness of society and history – and cultivate clear and contextually appropriate communication skills. Such minds are the foundation for humanistic societies. Educators have always recognized the importance and value of the study of humanities – and of language and literature – for the development of the mind.

It follows that the study of literature is uniquely placed to develop certain essential humanistic qualities in an individual. Time and again, curriculum developers across the world reiterate the need, both existentially and intellectually, to engage with the culture of one's own community as well as the cultures of distant communities. Imaginative literature – including truthful, factual, non-fiction writing – describes the conditions of life, the aspirations and achievements of humanity, the tragic acts of inhumanity. Great writing – including fictional narratives and non-fiction accounts – in prose and poetic forms, offers readers an insight into the values by which people lived and live. Such literature offers deep insights into the history of the human world in distant or unfamiliar times and places, during periods of conflicts and triumphs, much of which we can hardly experience first-hand.

Reading and exploring unfamiliar cultural and historical contexts widens our perspective about the world. The most significant outcomes of these explorations, as research (see References) tells us, are the development of empathy and width of perception. The reader begins to sense that value judgments and concepts of social morality are astoundingly varied across communities. Educators understand this, regardless of whether students – and sometimes parents – appreciate the value of the study of literature. The debate is not about whether to teach literature, but how to engage each generation – with its own unique set of life objectives – in literature.

Any input aimed at making a classroom discipline more engaging and valuable inevitably requires the teacher to be original, creative, and sensitive, with a view to deepen the value of learning, but without adding to the content burden placed upon a student. What does this mean?

The challenge the teacher faces is to engage the students in the texts that are being taught. Does engagement depend on the depth of the thematic content of a text? On the relevance of the text to one's life? On the simplicity or complexity of ideas in the text? Which of these elements contributes to keeping student interest alive?

A text must speak to the learner. In our lives as educators and lifelong learners, we have seen how we have moved away from certain literary masterpieces of an earlier era to more contemporary writing that will someday earn the appellation of being a masterpiece.

I suggest that books such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series are worth a serious look in this context. One genre of literature which engages young learners today is fantasy and adventure, including science fiction. Probing what is empirically unknown or even deemed unknowable, but to which the young mind is keenly drawn, might seem to remove one from the immediate reality of everyday life, considered so vital to develop empathy. Does it mean that, to be engaged in literature, today's students need to be removed from day-to-day concerns or concerns of socio-economic, political significance and issues of history, which play an important role in understanding our present reality? The answer, obviously, is no.

What was it about the film *Oppenheimer* that drew many young people to the theatres? Were they all hoping to learn nuclear fission in a three-hour lesson? *Oppenheimer* told an important story. The movie raised questions about the ethics of doing science, and it gripped the audience, many of them young people. Movies such as *Avatar* and *Black Panther*, which take you into unexplored lands and terrains, movies that challenge the ability of the best-made computers to save human life in precarious situations, movies that probe beyond the boundaries of reality as we know it, engage young minds a great deal. There is a lesson in this for me. If dream-like fantasy about the improbable is one side of these riveting tales of adventure, the other side is an attempt to probe the infinite capacity of the human mind to do good and evil.

In today's world, the youth is being challenged by questions which are substantially different from those that earlier generations faced in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The vexing issues facing our youth are not so much about social conventions and norms, not so much about what or who is right and who is wrong, but these are more abstract issues

Photo: Sakti Prasanna Monhanty, courtesy: DAV Public School, Pokhariput.
Photo has been altered for illustrative purpose.

of knowledge itself: how we can discover what we can only imagine, how far and fast can we each make a breakthrough and overcome conventional barriers to knowing.

What kind of writing could serve this search? Perhaps non-fiction is the soundest basis in which such texts could be found. Living is the greatest adventure. Learning is the way to fully experience the adventure of living. If this spirit of adventure is addressed in texts chosen carefully in specific areas of knowledge, a vibrant interest could be awakened. Records about pioneers who have led, crusaders who never gave up, are inspirational to the adventurous learner.

Several biographies, such as essays about women scientists, their struggles for recognition, their achievements, especially in England, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, are as inspirational as they are well-written. These texts have more to offer the reader than information on science, because of the underlying question of establishing intellectual equality between the genders. Similarly, in a class on geography, exploration stories can be used effectively. For example, an old favourite, the astonishing one-man *Kon-Tiki* expedition, describes how to create a vessel out of extremely light material. Now, a text like that describes the intrepid nature of the explorer, as well as his scientific and technological knowledge. In the history class, a text about an archeological expedition might offer a fine reading experience. Prescribed textbooks for study in individual disciplines could include non-fiction texts about prehistoric times to explain evolution, about climate change to encourage green invention, and about archaeology to discover the development of ancient languages. Texts in cultural studies, orations of humanists, histories of industrialists, and biographies of inventors – in short, narratives that introduce how social change occurs inspire the young reader. Ideally, a teacher would pick out passages where a strong episode with emotional impact is narrated to hold the reader's attention in the unfolding of a storyline.

The teacher's approach and the teacher's creativity can introduce the foundation of literary appreciation during the reading of texts. A text is impactful both for what it says and how it says it. The "how" relates to the way the content or the subject matter is organized and expressed in words. Something as fundamental as "show, don't tell," works differently in imaginative texts and non-fiction texts. Figurative speech is far less frequently used in non-fiction texts than in imaginative narratives.

A discussion about teaching literature is conventionally incomplete if it fails to address how literary terms are to be taught. In my experience, knowledge of literary techniques and rhetorical devices is useful only if it develops in the learner an appreciation of effective writing and purposeful structuring of texts. Formal lists with definitions and examples don't necessarily support the enjoyment of reading. The teachable moment in each text needs to be effectively used to introduce useful concepts and terms, and to describe the features of a literary work that make it effective and powerful.

Fresh modes of writing evolve with ardent new voices. Changing social reality finds expression in hitherto unfamiliar treatment of that reality, in idioms that challenge established norms. The study of literature today is most fruitful when it connects disciplines and awakens contemplation of one's human potential in contemporary terms.

Summing up

Texts that are age and context appropriate go a long way in interesting young readers in the study of literature. The teaching of literature in high school should aim at nurturing the ability in emerging generations to develop humanistic values, such as empathy and a vision for a just world. The study of good writing contributes significantly to acquiring the skills and tools needed to write with clarity and sensitivity. Fantasy and adventure writing appear to inspire young minds, as they seek their place in this time of knowledge explosion. Human capabilities when pitted against artificial intelligence call for an intrepid spirit of adventure, represented both in fantasy fiction and in non-fiction accounts of path-breaking pioneers in every area of human endeavour.

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Lessons in literature

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Navigating the world of literature

In nearly a decade of teaching at the Senior School, the exhilaration of teaching English literature has remained unparalleled. The English Core Course, offered at the Senior Secondary stage for schools affiliated with the CBSE, stands out not only for its emphasis on functional language skills but also for its profound impact on students' understanding of the world, thanks to its diverse and engaging literature syllabus. Consider this sampling: Poetic gems from the Romantic era to contemporary times on themes as varied as the need for quiet contemplation to the appreciation of beauty, dealing with loss, urban-rural divide characterized by economic disparity, subjugation of women in matrimony... all themes that not just resonate with present realities but also offer a critique on contemporary society through universal themes. The values and philosophical moorings in stories that exemplify the power of human connection, kindness and generosity to personal narratives about overcoming fear, leadership lessons from the freedom struggle, to commentaries on the stark realities of child labour and illegal immigration, to social issues like cultural assimilation and caste-based discrimination, to dealing with real/imaginary/self-imposed limitations, the literature syllabus for class 12 is an eclectic mix of literary texts from world literature. This curriculum prioritizes the development of practical language skills and equips students with the tools to engage critically with the world around them. It also cultivates empathy, social awareness, and a deeper understanding of the intricacies of our society.

Setting clear learning objectives: a foundation for meaningful engagement

Before teaching literature, the teacher must have well-thought-out objectives and a plan to realize those objectives of studying literature at the school level. The starting point for this exercise could be articulating the learning objectives and sharing them with the students. The next step would be to establish the relevance of the learning objectives in the lives of the students. Let me illustrate this with an example.

When teaching the poem, *A Thing of Beauty* by John Keats from the class 12 English textbook, the following learning objectives can be shared with the students:

1. Determine the central idea/s of the poem and analyze its development throughout the poem, including how they interact and build on one another; provide an objective summary of the poem.

2. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support the analysis of what the poem says with inferences drawn from the text.
3. Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions in groups, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
4. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence.
5. Refer to evidence from the text to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
6. Articulate in writing an analysis of the central idea and evaluate its treatment as well as the effectiveness of the use of poetic devices in furthering the poet's objectives.

Relevance of learning objectives

Now, to establish the relevance of the learning objectives outlined above, the teacher could begin this way:

Poets and philosophers have long thought about/ruminated on the big questions of life:

- What is the purpose of human life?
- What is the cause of human misery?
- What is the panacea to alleviate suffering?
- How do we deal with the pressures and cares of life?

The given poem which is an excerpt from a longer piece of work is a representative piece of the romantic period in English Literature. The clarion call of the movement was "back to nature".

Nature appears as a predominant theme in the poems written by Romantic poets. Nature was presented as a "nurse", "teacher", "muse", etc., to give man a reprieve from the care and pressures of life and heal his ailing spirit and battered soul!

The universal theme exemplified in the poem is very relevant to the present times. It shows the way to attain happiness and remain immune to negativity.

Interactive teaching strategies: bringing literature to life

Next, the teacher can carry out a brief activity –

Ask students to close their eyes for two minutes and recollect/relive any instance or experience that filled them with a sense of awe

Photos courtesy: B. Ajitha

and wonder. They could think of a time/instance when they experienced unbridled joy.

Through a series of questions, get the students to see how happiness is a mental state that can be attained by dwelling on experiences that once made us happy and thus become a source of continuous bliss.

After this "warm-up" of the mind, the teacher can lead a class discussion to elicit varied interpretations in line with the idea that poetry can have as many interpretations as there are readers, and that there is no 'one' interpretation of a poem. The purpose of studying poetry is for students to be able to make personal connections with the particular poem. Realizing this objective makes the exercise fruitful.

Application of hexagonal thinking framework: a collaborative learning experience

Next, Students can be given opportunities to explore the themes encountered in the poem in detail and establish connections between them. It would also be a good exercise to explore the interconnectedness of themes with another text – *On the Face of It,* for instance – through the hexagonal thinking framework.

The hexagonal thinking framework

Students take a set of hexagons (that the teacher keeps ready) with varied terms, concepts, themes, real-world connections, etc., that relate to the current unit of study, and then link them together into an interconnected web. In small groups, they must decide which hexagons link best to which others.

This can be done with paper hexagons or with hexagons online. Once done, the students can explain and argue for the order they have placed their hexagons in. They can write about key connections and finally present their choices to the class.

Sample the following:
Directions for the digital version* of the activity shared with the students:

Take the set of hexagon themes that relate to the story *On the Face of It* and the poem *A Thing of Beauty*, and link them into an interconnected web. Use your critical thinking skills to decide which hexagon links best with which others.

#1 Create your web of ideas

In hexagonal thinking, you connect terms and ideas through the sides of each hexagon. A hexagon has six sides, therefore each term or concept can potentially connect with up to six others. Use your critical thinking to decide where the terms you have been given best fit in the web of hexagons provided. Your goal is to drag each term to the position where it best fits within the overall web. Make the most important connections your priority. You may not use every hexagon. Leave gaps where you are not able to make connections.

#2 Explain your connections

Once you've decided where each concept should go, you should be ready to explain its placement. In the slide following your web, choose five significant connections and explain each one.

Terms
Observation
Uplifting
Beauty
Emotional
Harness
Nature
Art
Death Meaning
Gloom
Despair
Identity
Literature
Transience
Physical
Immersion
Self-actualization
Spiritual

*https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/hexagonal-thinking/

A finished Product:

The hexagonal thinking framework could be used either as an in-class activity providing an opportunity for collaborative learning among students in small groups or assigned as an extended learning activity to be done individually at home. Either way, the activity is designed for extrapolation beyond the text and helps identify the central ideas, elaborate on their significance, and make thematic connections between texts.

The activity could be followed by a written assignment that includes thoughtfully framed questions on both literary analysis and critical appreciation.

The power of connections

A literature class ought to be interactive and not limited to dialogues with the teacher alone. The interaction among students is vital to not just deepen the understanding of the text but more importantly to exchange ideas and thereby sensitize them towards respecting different viewpoints by being open-minded and agreeing to disagree with civility.

Empowering students through collaborative learning

We are social beings, eager to forge connections through common interests. A teacher of literature should leverage the natural propensity of the human mind to build connections – either with the text under study or with peers who form their immediate social milieu. Meaningful activities that promote collaborative learning should be carefully chosen and integrated at the most opportune moment in the teaching plan. This could be in the form of the innocuous 'Think-Pair-Share' or collaborative learning strategies like reciprocal reading, Jigsaw, or any other form of group work.

Transformative potential of teaching literature

Learning literature holds the promise of a transformative experience for students-broadening their horizons by fostering critical thinking, moulding their understanding of the world, and acting as a vehicle to carry and transport varied perspectives and world views. From lucid articulation of learning objectives to carefully designing the teaching plan, which includes structured and at times unstructured activities to promote collaborative learning, higher order thinking skills like analysis, evaluation, and creation; creating opportunities for creative and meaningful extended learning tasks after school, beyond the classroom, which caters to their varied interests and preferred way of demonstrating their understanding and engagement with the text, the teacher plays a crucial role in bringing alive the beauty of literature and unlocking its transformative power for impressionable minds.

Literature as a gateway to the world

When done with the right intent, teaching literature fosters a lifelong appreciation for the written word and prepares students with the right attitude and mindset to steer through the world. As educators, we need to rely on intuitive teaching methods that are time-tested for their efficacy and at the same time continue to innovate and incorporate creative ways to facilitate a deep engagement with literary texts all the while being mindful of the profound impact it can have on shaping the minds and hearts of the students we teach.

In the words of John Keats, 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever.' Let us strive to make literature a source of joy and timeless wisdom that are windows to the world.

TP

Nurturing new poets

Saumya Choudhury
is the founder of Delhi Poetry Slam, an organization encouraging youth to express themselves through spoken word poetry. She is also a poet and speaker. She can be reached at info@delhipoetryslam.com.

Poetry, with its lyrical cadence and evocative imagery, holds a special place in literature, offering a unique avenue for self-expression and exploration of the human experience. Yet, in many educational settings, it remains underappreciated and overlooked.

As both a poet and the founder of Delhi Poetry Slam, I've dedicated the last 10 years to breathing new life into poetry and capturing the imagination of young minds. My journey has a lot to do with poetry as a speak-and-listen art form rather than the primary emphasis being on reading.

And I have to say that I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of poetry in unlocking the creative potential of young minds. Poetry facilitates self-expression, bringing out sensitive topics with ease and cultivates deeper understanding among students. Drawing from my experiences gained through years of conducting workshops in schools, I find some strategies very useful for teaching poetry effectively and also motivating students to write their own verses. So when *Teacher Plus* invited me to contribute an article to their delightful magazine on the topic, I was thrilled and eagerly jumped at the opportunity.

Children are natural poets, instinctively attuned to the musicality of language and the power of imagination. Unlike adults, who may be hindered by self-doubt and preconceived notions of what poetry should be, children approach the art form with unbridled curiosity and enthusiasm. From the whimsical rhymes of nursery rhymes to the introspective verses of adolescent poetry, young people engage with poetry on a deeply personal level, using words to make sense of their emotions, experiences, and surroundings.

During a workshop at American Embassy School, New Delhi, I witnessed a group of third-graders eagerly composing poems inspired by their favourite animals. With crayons in hand and excitement in their voices, they crafted verses brimming with vivid imagery and playful language, delighting in the joy of creative expression.

Poetry provides a safe and accessible outlet for children to explore complex feelings and ideas, such as self-discovery and bullying, allowing them to express themselves freely without fear of judgment or criticism. Through poetry, students can articulate their hopes, fears, dreams, and aspirations, forging a deeper connection with themselves and others.

At Delhi Poetry Slam, we host an event once every month. With humble beginnings in 2013, we quickly gained momentum with lots of interest in participation from teenagers and youth in Delhi. A decade later, youngsters audition online, weeks prior to the event, hoping for a chance to perform their original poetry in front of a like-minded audience.

At one such poetry slam event hosted by Delhi Poetry Slam, a shy 14-year-old took to the stage and recited a deeply personal poem about her struggles with bullying and self-esteem. As she spoke, her voice trembled with emotion, but with each word, she grew more confident, empowered by the knowledge that her voice mattered and was heard.

Furthermore, poetry cultivates empathy by inviting readers to step into others' shoes and see the world through different perspectives. Through exposure to a diverse range of poetic voices and themes, students develop empathy and understanding for people from diverse backgrounds and experiences, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society.

In a classroom discussion about Langston Hughes' poem titled *Harlem*, students engaged in a thoughtful exploration of the poem's theme of racial injustice towards Black people in America. Through dialogue and reflection, they gained insight into the lived experiences of being discriminated against and the importance of eradicating social evils.

Photo courtesy: Delhi Poetry Slam

Effectively, teaching poetry begins with creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment where students feel empowered to explore their creativity and take risks. By incorporating a variety of teaching strategies and techniques, teachers can make poetry accessible and engaging for students of all ages and abilities.

During a workshop at Springdales School, New Delhi, I introduced students to the concept of found poetry*, challenging them to create poems using words from newspapers, magazines, and other texts. As they sifted through the pages, searching for words and phrases that resonated with them, they discovered the beauty and power of language in unexpected places.

One approach to teaching poetry is through performance, which adds a dynamic dimension to the reading experience and captivates audiences with the rhythm and cadence of the spoken word. By encouraging students to recite poems aloud and experiment with voice modulation and expression, teachers can help them develop confidence and fluency in their oral communication skills.

At a poetry workshop hosted by Delhi Poetry Slam, students participated in a series of improvisational exercises designed to enhance their performance skills. Through role-playing and dramatic interpretation, they brought poems to life, infusing each line with emotion and energy, much to the delight of everyone watching.

*Found poetry is created using only those words or phrases selected from another text.

If you're a teacher looking for new ways to encourage poetry in your classroom, I'd recommend a competition. Children and teenagers love competitions, even if they offer small prizes. The Wingword Poetry Competition is a competition for children, across the country, to participate in, offering lots of prizes. Entries come in from nooks and corners of India. This competition not only offers the prospect of winning a financial reward but also huge encouragement and recognition to beginners, for example being featured in nationally leading newspapers and getting published in an anthology. The success of this competition shows that it can be done at smaller levels: in your school, or classroom, or even locality.

Poetry has always been a powerful and transformative force. It offers students a means of self-expression and exploration. By adding an element of fun to poetry in the CBSE curriculum and also providing students with opportunities to engage with the art form in meaningful and creative ways, teachers can cultivate a lifelong appreciation for literature and empower young people to find their voice and share their stories with the world.

Who knows? You might just inspire the next generation of poets, storytellers, and dreamers.

TP

Help the imagination take wing

Cheryl Rao
writes for children of all ages. Her series *Fun with Creative Writing* and *Fun with Phonics* (stories) have been reviewed in *Teacher Plus*. She can be reached at cherbrag@yahoo.com.

'Literature speaks the language of the imagination, and the study of literature is supposed to train and improve the imagination.' – *Northrop Frye, author and literary critic, 1912-1991*

That is what we would like, isn't it? To help the imagination of the children in our care take wing. And to achieve this we cannot overestimate the value of literature because literature is unparalleled as a medium for enlightenment and instruction.

The magic of words and the love for them can begin very early in life. Most of us are introduced to literature at an early age at the feet of a parent or grandparent who has a flair for telling stories. This introduction is usually in the form of fables, fairy tales, myths, and legends. These tales, from wherever they are in the world, of whichever time or culture, are similar in their aim: illustrating the eternal struggle between good and evil, and greed and satisfaction; demonstrating the difference between cleverness and cunning, extolling mental and emotional strength, wisdom and honour, and in general, trying to set a child on an ethical path in life.

Literature opens doors and gives a child the freedom and licence to open a few more on her own. The aim is that the child will be motivated to seek 'more', and thus their journey into unknown realms begins because a child exposed to literature gets inspired to take a thought or idea forward.

The pre-primary level

How we love picture books when we are very young! This is literally the time when a picture is worth a thousand words. Picture books allow stories to unfold graphically with few or no words. Attractive illustrations accompanied by simple words give a fillip to a child's imagination and set them on that path to 'MORE'.

Even at this stage, the participation and involvement of the listener makes a big difference. Rather than merely reading out the story, the narrator can draw the child into the story by referring to similar situations, bringing out other possibilities, asking what they would do if faced with a similar choice, before going on to read what the protagonist does – and of course, well-modulated voices, expressive eyes, hand gestures, role

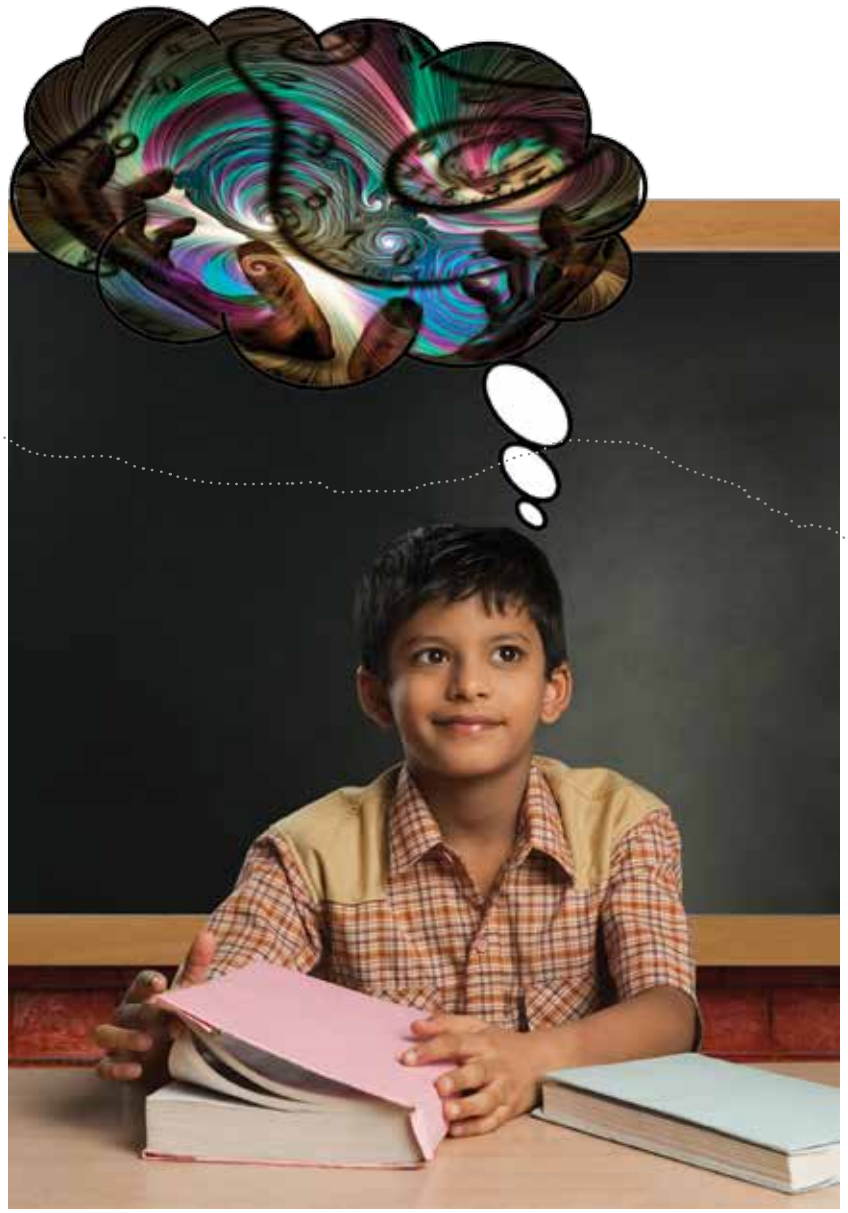
play, all these draw listeners in and add to the impact of a story.

It is not only simple concepts and simple words that can be introduced at this level. Some young listeners have more advanced vocabulary and will be able to process more complicated stories and ideas.

Primary school

In primary school, the real journey of our imagination begins – at least, it did for me.

Apart from the stories my parents and older siblings narrated, the magic of literature began for me with the first story in my English textbook in class 3. In a little over 170 words, I was dragged onto a seaside, where a dog named Sultan saved a young girl from drowning. Not only was my imagination captured immediately, but so was my heart! Dogs became my favourite pets; Sultan became one of my favourite names for a pet; and probably most significantly, I never ventured beyond mid-calf into waters anywhere!



There were fairy tales, fables, nature stories, tall tales, legends, poems in that book and all of them remain fresh in my mind despite the passage of more decades than I would like to count!

In primary school, to make stories memorable, if a child has read, for example, a short excerpt from a book, it would be wonderful to tell the child something more about that story. Perhaps another incident from the story, or an overview, or the gist of the story. Along with that, the child can be encouraged to express what they would have done in a similar situation or whether anything similar has happened to them or to someone they know. This will help them connect with the stories, experience them 'up close' and enjoy them more thoroughly.

If the story is set in a place unfamiliar to the child, a little bit of its geography and culture can be discussed. The setting can be brought alive, so can the time in which the story took place, the lifestyle and habits of the people, etc.

In primary school, introducing children to the lives of great people from all spheres of life also triggers young minds into looking at the infinite possibilities the future presents and all the potential they have within them.

Stories of explorers, scientists, and sportspersons are what will make a little girl insist on scrambling up the 'mighty' slope in a park because she imagines she is a young Junko Tabei or Bachendri Pal, or make a little experimenter in a shed believe she can be

Use your imagination

Classes 3-5

Action in your pencil box

Have you ever wondered what happens to your pencils when you are asleep? Do they lie quietly in your pencil box – or do they wake up and have a party with the ruler and the eraser? Or do they quarrel with the ruler and the eraser? Write in five sentences what you think your pencils do at night.

Character sketch

There is someone in your class or near your home with whom you like to spend time. You play together, you study together, sometimes you go camping together or you go on holidays/ sleepovers with his/her family.

Describe this boy or girl. Write what is special about this person. How does he/she dress? How does he/she talk? How does he/she behave? What are the special things he/she likes to do? Are there interesting things about the person? What makes him/her stand out? What makes you like this person?

Classes 6-8

Dialogue writing

Write a dialogue between

i) You and your big brother (if you don't have a big brother, imagine having one) when he finds you have broken the cycle/tennis racquet he got as a present for his birthday. OR

ii) You and your pet dog (who can talk) when both of you get lost during a trek or a camping trip.

Writing a myth

A myth is a folktale that tells you about the actions of heroes from the past, or of gods and goddesses. A myth can also tell you interesting tales of how some truths of nature came to be. These tales are not based on actual truth, or science, or history, but are imaginative stories that explain the facts of nature. Can you write a myth on how rabbits came to have long years?

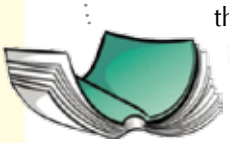
Read this article online at www.teacherplus.org and find more writing exercises.

another Madame Curie, or lead the 'fossil hunter' in the garden to persist because of what she knows of palaeontologist Jack Horner.

And later in life, when they read more about these and other achievers, they will recall the influence they had on them and will be more than ready to expand the range of information, maybe going into scientific principles or training schedules, happily receptive to the details because of that earlier connection.

Middle school

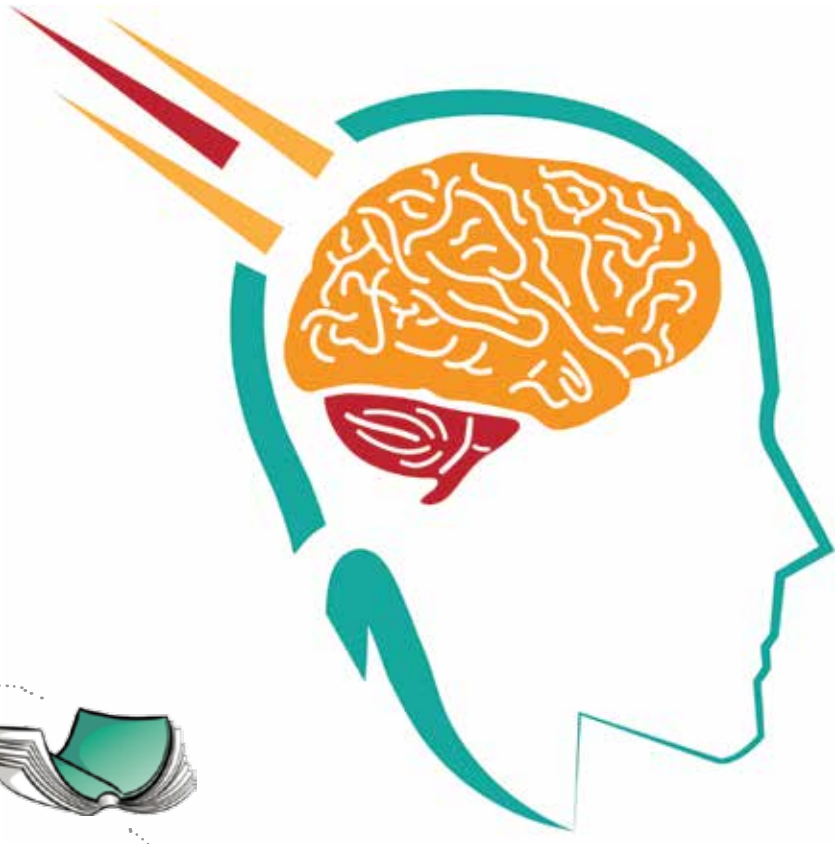
In middle school, creativity can really take wing. This is the age when a child is most receptive to ideas. These are the 'wonder years', the time when young people can take their first steps towards doing 'wonders' themselves.



Teachers and mentors can experiment in many ways. Each month could be dedicated to one genre – with fiction as the flavour of one month, then poetry, then science stories, tales from other lands, and so on. The teacher's role at this stage is to ignite the fires of curiosity and encourage middle-schoolers to come up with their own suggestions of how they would like to "discover literature" so that their voyage becomes a lifelong adventure.

Ask students what happens when they start to read. Do they begin to paint pictures in their minds as they visualize the events that unfold?

The next step is connecting with what they visualize. Does something in that story strike a chord? Imagine a 10-year-old with an obsession for dinosaurs. If she starts reading a story about an explorer who discovers a live dinosaur in an unknown land, she connects immediately with the character and the situation and is eager to read on. (This 'connection' makes a huge difference in this wonderful journey into the unknown, where some may like



to read about the familiar, others may prefer stories of galaxies far, far away.)

Then, as the story continues, the reader or the listener questions some aspects, perhaps wonders about the motives of a character, clarifies doubts, and then begins to predict what will happen. How will the problem, the conflict that is the basis of the story, resolve? Will the story end happily? Will the characters overcome the trials they are going through?

When, finally, the end of the story has been read, that is the time to think about it, evaluate it, and decide on many things: Did I like the story? Why did I like it? Which character and which part of the story did I like best? Why? Did the theme of the story and the language and style of the writer appeal to me? What did it make me feel? Would I recommend the story to someone else? Would I read the story again? Why or why not?

Middle schoolers who understand the processes they go through as they read also learn to be good writers and communicators because they understand the processes that readers of their work will go through. This will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives, in whatever they choose to do.

High school

By high school, the problem of what they will do in their future begins to weigh youngsters down. The burden of the curriculum is also significant, but reading can help them relax.

Here is where the teacher can be a campaigner for literature, dropping hints about what she is reading at present; what helped her at this stage of her life; sparing a few moments to talk about a new book, an old book, a popular book, a controversial book... because literature can unlock the doors of minds and send us on journeys to faraway lands and a distant time (or next door and right now), where we can meet people who achieve the impossible, do great things – or just do things differently. And at this difficult stage in a young person's life, they need to be reminded that they are not alone.

Somewhere, sometime, someone else has faced similar situations and problems and reading about them helps immensely!

Right from our earliest interaction with stories, when something clicks with us and we identify with a character or a situation, whichever way a reader is inveigled into this world of imagination, there is no holding back, no stopping: for the journey is a lifelong one. And thanks to all that we read we are better equipped to manoeuvre the unfamiliar at every step of our journey. Also, this world will be a more tolerant and tolerable place with more discerning and imaginative readers, will it not?

TP

Let's not give the short story short shrift!

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The short story has been an effective and popular storytelling medium for as long as humans have told stories, and predates both publishing and even writing. It's a form that has always been relevant, and will always continue to be.

Perhaps because of the diversity and complexity of this form, one thing that must always be remembered about the short story is – there is no one true way of either reading or writing a short story, and the range of reader responses to stories is as wide and complex as the innumerable ways of writing them, across languages, cultures, eras, and media.

The short story as an art form in itself is, of course, an entirely different animal from the short stories that students have to write in school. Brilliant, experienced, professional authors can take years to perfect their short works, but students mostly have to scramble together short stories – at best, on urgent deadlines, at worst, in a few minutes during an exam. So it is perhaps unfair

to compare these practices, or to expect anything but bare-bones functionality from the work students produce under these circumstances. It is also quite unfair to expect teachers to use these exercises to inspire or develop within students a love for reading, or writing, as examinations or homework are very unlikely to instill a passion for creativity, except perhaps creative ways to survive these assignments. Students who already love reading and writing will find these assignments easy, and the rest will struggle past them and survive. But these pragmatic details aside, it's entirely likely that reading short stories for pleasure, if students can be encouraged to do so, is very likely to send them off on joyous journeys of discovery. The Internet is especially full of diverse and wonderful short fiction, whether in the form of cutting-edge literary magazines, or popular fan fiction forums (chances are that several students are already obsessed with these, and don't even realize they have a love for reading because they see them as entertainment). Even the oft-derided social media platforms are treasure-hoards of brilliant short-form storytelling in different media. In today's visual, fast-paced, multi-tabbed, attention-deficit, information-saturated world, everyone is already constantly thinking of finding ways to communicate more effectively, more beautifully and more entertainingly over short stretches of storytelling. So it is not especially challenging to get students interested in short stories – they already are. The challenge might lie in persuading them to not see short stories as homework, or engaging with short stories in more formal contexts, or eras or places they cannot relate to. But we live in a world where storytelling is a necessary skill and time is short even for young people. The project, therefore, becomes not one of evangelizing students into any predefined format of literature, but of getting them to develop skills they already want to into formats and structures that they might not know they are likely to enjoy, and might be predisposed to resist.

How do students get better at writing short stories?

In the interest of brevity, let's discuss only the basic framework through which one might look at short story writing as an absolute beginner, or as a student interested in creating a working short story under fairly harsh constraints of length or time – probably both.

In the interests of communicating effectively and simply, especially with external readers who don't know the student well, it's probably best to use a basic three-part structure like most films, plays, and essays do – the beginning, the middle and the end. Students who are natural storytellers can probably just write their stories organically without preparation, but students who don't have a natural grasp of this should be encouraged to work with a rough draft where they quickly think of the given topic, figure out an event which could be the beginning, middle, or end of the story, and work out the other two parts from there. These other parts could either be other events or consequences or precursors to the single event that enhance the fundamental idea dramatically, thematically, or experientially.

Once this basic idea is in place – what is the story about?

Then there are several filters through which one can look at the actual execution of the writing. It isn't necessary that all of these are central to the process, but at least one needs to be done well for the story to work, for the creation of a spine or throughline which creates an emotional or cerebral impact on the reader. These are the fundamental elements of storytelling in any medium at any length, and they are all interlinked: each element well executed will also contribute positively to the others. There are no universally

correct or measurable ways to tell stories well, of course, but in the balance of these elements lies the key to good writing.

Plot: How many events occur in the story? Are they fittable within the word count? Are they in a logical and believable chain of cause and effect? Do they create a dramatic impact?

Character: Who is your main character/characters? Do they transform, grow or otherwise during the story? What makes them interesting?

Theme: Is your story based on the exploration of a specific idea, argument or emotion? What are the stages of conveying this dramatically and narratively, through a person or a group? How do we make sure this is a story and not an essay?

Style/voice: How do we make the narration interesting and entertaining for the reader using elements like description, dialogue, action and articulation of thought and emotion through internal monologue? While it's not right to expect students to have distinct styles or voices, what kind of storytelling are they good at/naturally drawn to?

How can teachers help develop these skills?

There are essentially two questions to consider here.

First, what is the desired result of the story writing exercise? If it is to prepare the student for an exam, then this requires trend analysis and pattern recognition on the part of the teacher. In addition to giving general feedback (that is, general, unbiased and non-judgmental tips on improving the story from a creative point of view) there is the additional task of ensuring that nothing in the story might be objectionable to a hypothetical examiner, or cause the student to lose marks. Thus, the teacher serves the function of external-exam censor, commissioning editor in a publishing house, and legal department of the publisher. It's important, should this function become necessary, to assure the student of the value of their opinions and feelings as a storyteller while pointing out the pragmatic risks of not only causing offence, but even of falling outside the taste/knowledge spectrum of an unknown third party reading the story.

Second, and more importantly from the teaching/improving storytelling skills point of view is exploring, with the student, how the story could have been told better and could have been more of what the student intended. The teacher then should not focus on their personal biases and tastes of what a great short story is, or encourage the student to mimic the voices and styles of classic storytellers. Instead, the teacher must cultivate empathy, and see what the students' intentions were with their story. The goal is: how do I make this story better at fulfilling its creative objectives but retain its character? Would an adjustment to a specific storytelling element address this? Is there a specific mistake or set of mistakes that the student is making that is preventing the story from being effective? Is it just a lack of practice – for example, a student attempting a story that would take the length of a whole novel or film to tell effectively, or getting stuck after a promising beginning – or is it something deeper, such as a genuine lack of a fundamental beginning-middle-end storytelling structure, or a fundamental inability to communicate or express themselves? Knowledge about the specific student is priceless here – can they speak confidently but are unable to put their thoughts down in writing? Are they bored or intimidated by the entire exercise and need redirection into talking about issues or people or situations they feel strongly about? Do they find the whole process confusing and need to be guided into breaking down the problem into smaller parts and solving them individually? Are they just not used to telling stories, or genuinely dislike the whole project and need a more rigorously defined pattern or structure they can adhere to for practical reasons until they can step away from this whole component of their studies at the earliest possible opportunity?

Storytelling can be an infinitely joyous and rewarding process, but it can also be infinitely challenging and complicated. Just as there is no one true way to tell or read a story, there is also no universal guideline to improve either stories or storytellers, or objective way to measure common sense-based improvements.

Fortunately, the key skills involved in helping students become better storytellers – empathy, flexibility, patience, rigour – are also the key skills that teachers need to cultivate in themselves. So whether or not teachers can effectively improve students' short story craft, attempting to do so will help them improve at their own work.

TP

‘Draw’ing from the world for children

Proiti Roy
is an illustrator for children’s books. She studied fine arts in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. She taught children art and crafts for 12 years. She had been a part of the advertising industry in Bangladesh before settling down with the idea to become an illustrator and graphic designer. She is actively involved with animal welfare work in and around Shantiniketan, where she lives with many rescued dogs. She can be reached at proitiroy@gmail.com.

Illustrations: Proiti Roy

Sometime around the mid 1990s I decided to explore the possibilities of illustrating for children’s books. I had no idea where to begin. I was then living in Calcutta, now Kolkata. It took me a few years of working as a freelance illustrator and designer, as well as teaching children art and craft before I got the opportunity, in 2005, to illustrate a children’s picture book. Since then, it has been a journey filled with myriad shades of colours. There have been ups and downs but never a moment of regret.

Each project comes with a new experience, and with each one I have learned something new and grown as an illustrator. With my experience as an art and craft teacher and spending so much time with children of all age groups, I thought I understood children and could communicate with them in the visual language. But it was not easy to create pictures to narrate a story. Very often, I went back to my childhood and remembered the times I spent with books.

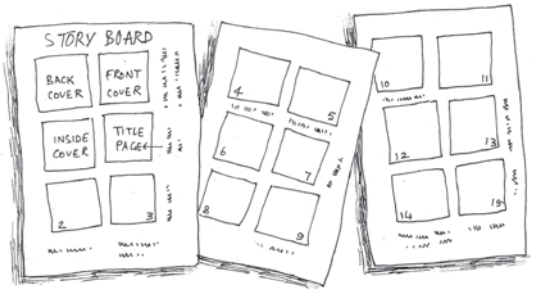
There are several stages that one has to go through when illustrating a book. Here is an account of how I work as an illustrator for children’s books. I learnt not to underestimate them as people. Their power of imagination is much more vivid than an adult’s.

I cannot function without my cup of coffee or *chai* at my worktable. And of course, my rescued dogs are by my side, always.

It starts with the text, which could be a story or poem. First, I spend time just thinking about the story. Then, I start scribbling and doodling ideas.

There are three visual elements that I have to develop before I start working on the actual artworks – character sketches, storyboard, and style of illustration.

I start by developing the characters. I draw sketch after sketch of the characters in various styles and personalities. A little bit of research is often required for details like regional attires and how the animal and natural world looks and behaves.



Then, I move on to try out a few styles and treatments of illustrations that I'd like to use for the project. If I'm very sure of what I want to do, I don't waste time on other options.

It is while working on the styles and treatment, that I decide what medium I must use to create the artworks. Should it be water colours, pastels, colour-pencils, or mixed media?

Finally, I create a storyboard or thumbnails to break the story down visually, page by page.

I share all the work I have done so far with the publishers and wait for their feedback.

In a few days, I receive notes/comments and points from the publisher and after a few adjustments, I'm ready to start.

When I work on a picture book, there are some aspects that I enjoy immensely and some that can be frustrating and often boring!

I enjoy planning the pages... arranging the characters, objects, and elements on the canvas. Almost like a theatre stage. And then adding colours and bringing the pages alive.

Repeating the same characters on every page and keeping the continuity can get somewhat monotonous. But in the end, when I see the complete work, I feel it was all worth it!

Once all the spreads are approved by the publisher I am ready to send the high resolution artwork files along with illustrations for the cover and title page.

The day I receive a printed copy of the book that I had worked on for so many months, I feel like a child! I don't think I need to explain why.

But after the excitement settles down, I go through the book and I see the flaws in the illustrations and get a little upset. "I could have done better or differently," I say to myself. But this is also a moment when I feel I can improve, learn, and practice more.

My journey as a children's book illustrator will not be complete if I don't mention the animal welfare work I'm involved with. Somehow these two are connected. The rescued cats and dogs that live with me as well as all the other animals out there that need help, keep me focused on my illustration projects and make it my fulltime profession. The animal world is certainly a source of inspiration and much like children, they bring joy and hope. When I sit at my worktable, I am surrounded by my furry children, my mug of tea or coffee, and music... and I'm ready for yet another illustration assignment.

TP

Fiction and the learning of history

SV Iyer
is the author of *Rogues and Rajas: Dark Tales for Tumultuous Times*.

Teaching a practical class is a bit like trying to juggle cats – tricky business with uncertain outcomes. You can never know in advance if a new experiment is going to wow the kids or end in complaints and tears.

So, picture this: 7th grade, social science class. Our teacher tried something new. He whipped out these huge maps, packets of coloured pencils and a pile of stickers. Our mission (and we had no choice but to accept it) was to track and highlight major rivers, pinpointing key towns and tributaries.

It wasn't exactly a thrilling start. We had to memorize names – like we did off textbooks in regular classes – and at that age, maps are little more than abstract art. A handful of town names on a map? They might as well be a clutch of random computer-generated numbers.

The follow-up classes though were magical! Our teacher raised the maps up and turned them into storyboards. He created three fictional characters who lived in a BC era long, long ago – a merchant, a soldier, and a scholar – and traced their journeys across the land, highlighting key events and people of that time.

Suddenly, we had stories that breathed life into the names. A wealth of possibilities opened up as we learned something unique about each location that transformed it into a hub of human development. The once mundane pink and yellow stickers took on new dimensions. They now represented an action-packed larger-than-life connection to a past that seemed very present!

We dove headfirst into the battles that shaped the rise, fall, and resurrection of cities, learning of ancient trade routes teeming with silks, spices, ivory, and gold. We marvelled at the tales of geniuses and the curious practices of bygone schools. Alongside tales of triumph, we stumbled upon stories of bandits and tyrants who shook empires to their core. There were even quirky tidbits, like the absence of horses in ancient India, and passing nods to ideas such as taxation, which would loom so large in adulthood!

These stories fostered a thirst for more knowledge. What happened with these long dead people? Did they live happy lives? Can we still see their works today? Walk where they walked? And see their battlefields, their palaces, their pots and pans?

These stories were also very different from the "official" history we learned for our board exams later on. Our formal history classes presented the past as a set of indisputable facts and dates. There was a comforting certainty and matter-of-fact pride in our textbooks. They were also fairly one-sided, as if the outcomes of historical events were predetermined, and people's behaviours and decisions devoid of nuance or debate. They portrayed humanity in broad stereotypes.

For instance, emperors were always either ruthless conquerors or sickly despots. Like Genghis Khan, who was painted black for sweeping across Eurasia looting, raping, and indulging in violence all round. How many of us were taught this surprising aspect of his reign: the Khan's vast empire was ruled by his daughters – and in time, by other female relatives. Even widows in his family wielded considerable authority[1].

Genghis Khan had a distinctive practice upon conquering new territories: he arranged marriages between his daughters and the defeated rulers (or their heirs). Subsequently, he would enlist the groomed prince to serve in the Mongol army while entrusting governance to the bride. These daughters of the Khan played crucial roles in defending and administering the Silk Road highways, ports, cities, and strategic points throughout the empire. They interacted with dignitaries and couriers from courts across Persia, China, India, Russia, and Europe.

In an era where women had little agency over their own lives, Genghis Khan empowered them with the authority to govern entire cities and regions. They wielded the power to levy taxes, negotiate trade agreements, correspond with envoys, authenticate official documents and mobilize soldiers for defence. However, most historical textbooks and encyclopaedias available to children reinforce a "barbarian" stereotype along with a limited view of nomads and medieval times.

It is through the lens of historical fiction that most children first gain insight into the complex interplay of factors shaping human action. In these narratives, the reputations of revered rulers are not cast in stone. Take, for example, Ashoka[2], a figure lauded as "the Great" in textbooks. And indeed there is much for which he deserves praise. However, his unchecked power seems to have allowed him to perpetrate astounding acts of cruelty with minimal repercussions.

I use "seems to" because our understanding of Ashoka is largely drawn from conflicting Buddhist and Jain accounts, leading historians to approach definitive statements with caution. Concrete evidence, like stone inscriptions and monuments extolling his triumphs, offer more certainty. However, this bias has seeped into our school books, leaving major gaps in the narrative. For lay readers, historical novels have bridged the lacunae, shedding light on aspects such as Ashoka's brutal punishment of hundreds of wives and ministers for challenging his authority, or his genocidal campaign against Jains even after his purported contrition and conversion to Buddhism.

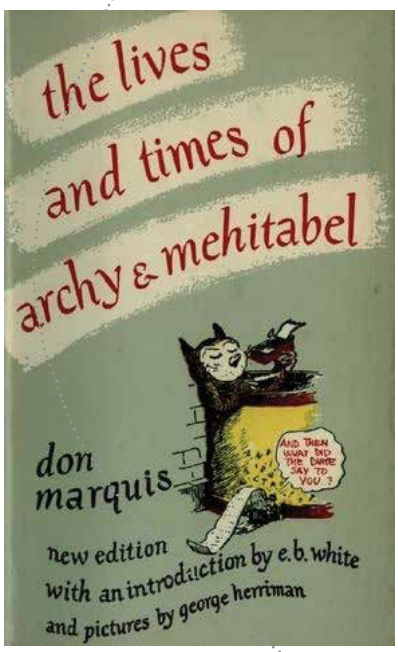
While it's understandable for Buddhist historians to praise a Buddhist ruler, modern curricula must not overlook such significant events. Why did a figure of absolute power across wide territories feel compelled to engage in such egregious behaviour? While we cannot claim to know with certainty, historical fiction provides developing minds with the opportunity to explore the possible motives and decisions of monarchs and dictators, fostering critical thinking and a deeper understanding of human complexities and motivations.

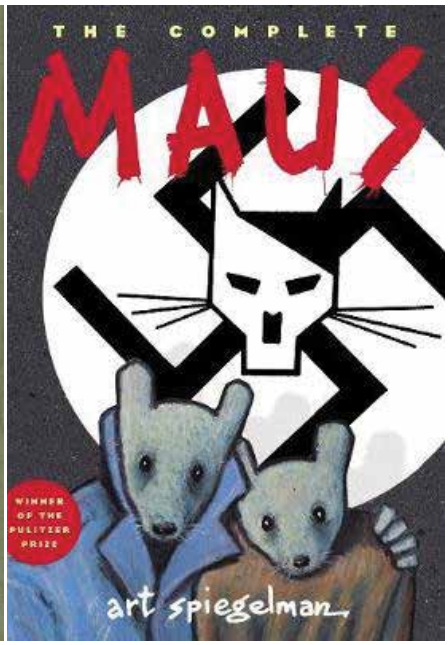
Photo: Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Source: Superb magazine, The Désirs & Volupté exhibition at the Musée Jacquemart-André , https://commons.wikimedia.org

This freedom to wonder, explore, and find perspective is a necessary investment of intellectual energy. While authors spend months, sometimes years, of painstaking research to craft atmospheric and plausible historical novels, students can experience this on a smaller scale by being asked to write short stories or create group projects with counterfactuals and clearly crafted rules/questions.

Most crucially, exploring historical fiction does not always mean reading, analyzing, or expressing oneself solely through novels.

Take for instance, the oil on canvas *The Rose of Heliogabalus* (see page 89). This depicts the banquet of Roman emperor Elagabalus as he honours his guests in such profusion of petals that some are smothered to death by the sheer weight. Did this actually happen? We cannot be sure. But it has been immortalized in the 19th century Dutch painting, as a warning to beware of the generosity of kings and the perils of absolute power. (Emperor Elagabalus seems to have been something of a practical joker: he supposedly invented the whoopee cushion, placing them under the seats of his snootier guests to take them down a notch or two!)


the lives and times of archy & mehitabel
don marquis
new edition
with an introduction by e.b. white
and pictures by george herriman

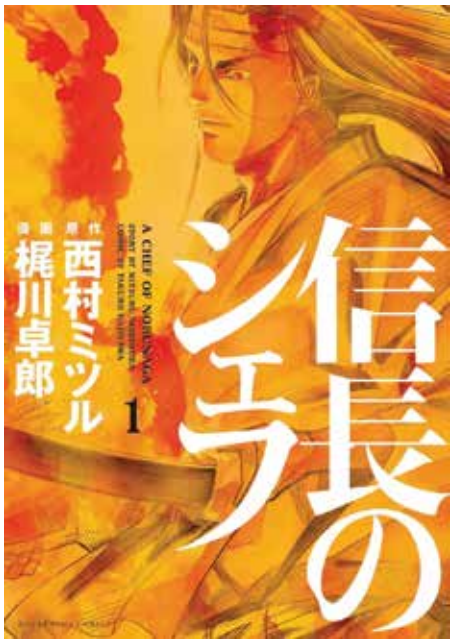


A wide variety of art plays the role of historical fiction. The poem *A Roman Lawyer in Jerusalem*[3] presents a rare defence of Judas Iscariot, forcing readers to question if he really was the traitor that two millennia of history make him out to be. Or, on a lighter note, we have the cockroach-poet Archy whose world – and verse, in *The Life and Times of Archy and Mehitabel* – is filled with reincarnated celebrities, from Shakespeare to Cleopatra, offering perspectives of once mighty spirits, now fallen into the bodies of animals.

Among the very best historical fiction – though this is somewhat genre-defying – is the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, which approaches issues of guilt and racial discrimination by using cats, mice, and pigs to portray Germans, Jews, and Poles during the holocaust. And Japanese pop art simply cannot be overlooked in this area: from Academy-Award-nominated biographical animes like *Kaze Tachinu* (*The Wind Rises*) to time-travel mangas like *Nobunaga*

Rogues and Rajas: Dark Tales for Tumultuous Times is an engaging collection of historical fiction offering a rare window into ancient India's shadowy past. Prompting reflection on human nature and our modern world, the stories explore the gambles, betrayals and plots of everyday folk as well as famous figures like Ashoka of Magadha, Shashanka of Bengal, Didda of Kashmir and Karikalan Chola of Tamilakam. Whether exploring the lives of kings or commoners, these stories delve into timeless themes of power and morality. Introduce your students to these gripping narratives and spark their imaginations with historical intrigue and ethical dilemmas.

Watch out for our full review of *Rogues and Rajas* in the July 2024 edition of *Teacher Plus* magazine.



Historical fiction: a few picks to get your students started

1. Any historical novel by Rosemary Sutcliff (e.g., *The Eagle of the Ninth, Dawn Wind, The Capricorn Bracelet*)
2. *The Prince and the Pauper*, Mark Twain
3. *The Story of The Amulet*, E Nesbit
4. *Little House On The Prairie*, Laura Ingalls Wilder
5. *Mary Poppins*, PL Travers
6. *The Inquisitor's Tale: or The Three Magical Children and Their Holy Dog*, Adam Gidwitz
7. *Anne of Green Gables*, LM Montgomery
8. *A Stitch In Time*, Daphne Kalmar
9. *Heidi*, Johanna Spyri
10. *Hans Brinker or the Silver Skates*, Mary Mapes Dodge
11. *Treasure Island*, RL Stevenson

no Chef (a delight alike for foodies and fans of the Warring States period), creators from the island nation are nothing short of brilliant in tracing the flow of time through surreal what-if plots.

Introducing children to these wide-ranging narrative forms from across the globe are not just about studying the past – they are about sharpening those mental muscles for the challenges of tomorrow. Many of our present-day conflicts, whether on hereditary matters, land rights, or individual freedoms, are complicated by long-established perspectives and precedents. By delivering history to students in the form of questions, to explore, rather than as indisputable facts to memorize, we can hope to raise broad-minded and liberal individuals guided by reason and empathy. The best historical fiction can help create a tolerant society with free thinkers and freedom of expression.

If for nothing else, consider that most facts come with an expiry date. This is what academics call the "half-life of knowledge". Coined by Fritz Machlup in 1962, it refers to the time in which half of the knowledge in a particular field is superseded or becomes obsolete. In a world increasingly ruled by big data, it has never been more important to hone the skills to navigate logically, creatively and with insight into the many networks and motivations that power our world.

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3. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9399

TP

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The abiding mystique of Indian mythology

Anuja Chandramouli
is a bestselling author and New Age Indian Classicist.
She can be reached at anujamouli@gmail.com.

In recent times, the tidal wave of interest in mythology has become something of a phenomenon. Thanks to the extraordinary success of the likes of Ashwin Sanghi, Anand Neelakantan, Arshia Sattar, Devdutt Pattnaik, Kavita Kane, Koral Dasgupta, Satyarth Nayak, and Amish Tripathi among others, the supposedly 33 crore deities from the Hindu pantheon have been retrieved from the musty passageways of memory and legend, dusted off, polished, retrofitted, and propelled into the collective consciousness with gleaming, often glamourous avatars. Big and small screen adaptations of beloved stories from the great Indian epics may have been skewered by the critics and have had mixed results at the box office but there is no denying the buzz these projects generate. People simply can't get enough of this treasure trove of stories handed down to us from a bygone era with the result that an endless stream of myth-based books, films, and shows are making their way to the marketplace for us to consume. But is this surfeit of a good thing really a good thing?

While those with a religious frame of mind or an appreciation for our glorious culture and heritage are no doubt thrilled that youngsters have taken to mythological lore in such a big way, the more conservative among the populace are frothing at the mouth with some of the artistic liberties taken with the sacrosanct material. Worse, there are those who seek to weaponize mythology to further the politics of hate and intolerance, which seeks to oppress and suppress socially and economically vulnerable groups. This misuse that springs from a misunderstanding of mythology warrants a closer look in the interests of preventing mayhem.

Illustration: Shilpy Lather

In this brave new world, the Gods are no longer all-powerful entities who leave the pious quaking with love, awe, or fear and must be blindly obeyed as per the tyrannical rulings of God's representatives on Earth. The immortals have been brought to the level of the mortals, where one may get up close and personal with them and I daresay find a wart or two and even grey hairs, in the midst of all that divine splendour. This intimate and irreverent relationship that has been forged with the supreme consciousness, appalling as it may be to some, is nevertheless a wonderful thing. And before extremists grab their weapons of sweeping condemnation and moral outrage, allow me to elaborate. Even the best, most steadfast of relationships must evolve to survive. Acknowledging that it is not only possible but even necessary to question the divine and argue over its very existence in order to better understand and draw closer to the almighty is a step in the right direction for what is essentially a personal odyssey towards spiritual upliftment.

Indian culture with its grandiose, sweeping range and a major chunk of traditions, religious, and otherwise that have been handed down over the millennia has endured despite repeated attacks by invaders who made short work of entire civilizations and the more ignorant among us working from within to undermine something beautiful and reduce it to its ugliest form. And no, this tenacious ability to persevere is not a fluke. Nor is it a miracle wrought by the one true God. The powerful Gods from Roman and Greek mythology rule only in the pages of charming fiction but are otherwise forgotten and certainly not worshipped. Youngsters hardly know the Norse Gods, except Thor and Loki, the mighty God of Thunder and his nemesis, who many believe to be the work of Stan Lee at his most creative for the Marvel juggernaut. Have the Egyptian Gods or the way of life that came into being with the magnificent Nile valley civilization retained their relevance? What about the Incans, Maya, or Aztecs? What really spared India from a similar fate?

While it has not been worked down to a science, the general consensus is that Indians have always had the ability to assimilate the best from other religions, cultures, and traditions even if it belongs to a hated conqueror in order to incorporate the best others have to offer with the vastness of the precious knowledge that was no doubt accumulated in the same way. It is through this remarkably symbiotic process that the giant strides made by our predecessors in the fields of art, science, philosophy, etc., have been preserved in the annals of mythology handed down from generation to generation and we ensure that the presents from the past survive the merciless sands of time.

This willingness to be inclusive and to open the heart to better engage with the mysteries of the universe comes from a core belief in the power of love to triumph over hate; to commit to knowledge and share it without facilitating ignorance or seeking to hoard the pearls of wisdom painstakingly gathered over aeons so that only a select few may benefit; to put aside petty, spite, and mean-spiritedness in the pursuit of elusive truths along the middle path between the sacred and sordid, so that we may transcend our human foibles and evolve into more enlightened beings. This commitment to truth and beauty which lies at the heart of Indian mythology is what makes it so easy to fall in love with and worthy of preservation across eternity.

If the modern era demands that we re-examine the way we choose to connect with our Gods and Goddesses, treating them as friends, adversaries, or intriguing puzzles that need to be scrutinized every which way, surely there is nothing wrong with it? Because for the most part, readers pick up these new-fangled books and view mythology-based content where creative license has been taken not merely because they are a fad or an amusing curiosity but out of an underlying sense of love and deep respect for a culture and heritage. The Ramayana and Mahabharata – the most beloved of Indian epics have more versions than can be accurately counted and incorporate elements from regions ranging across the length and breadth of the country and represent all sections of society. Why then should we disparage authors and content creators for taking mythology and doing with it what they will if it means that our children and their children will keep the best of our ancient beliefs close to their hearts and value it forever?

Hopefully future generations will take the old stories, add a little something new in keeping with their times and infuse them with a delicious irreverence and wicked humour that will make the most sacrilegious and contentious authors and mythmakers of the present-day roll in their graves. That would be fine too, because ultimately, we cannot have too much of a good thing especially when it is our good thing. Besides, mortals will live, love, outrage, despair, and die, but Indian mythology itself is immortal.

TP

From essays to tweets

Writing education for the digital generation

Shruti Singhal

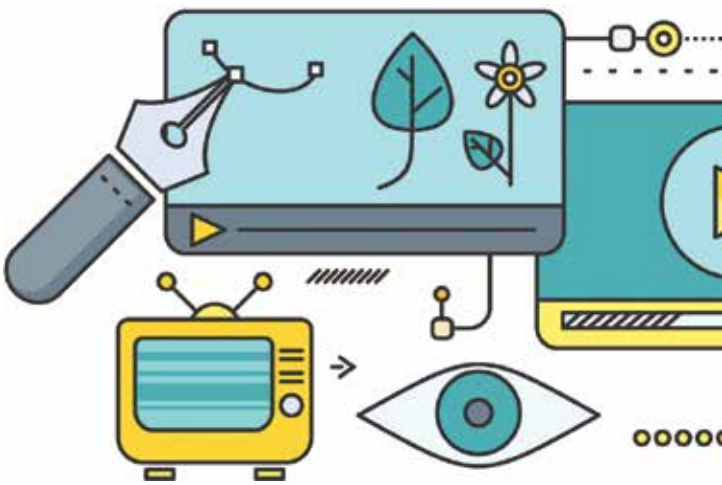
I finished school (class 12) in 2008, having chosen English literature as one of my main subjects, while English language was the mandatory subject. I loved both subjects: reading the classics and learning about the different eras in poetry in the literature classroom and persevering to get better at the mechanics of grammar and creative writing in the language classroom.

Writing essays, letters or emails, and summaries – exercises that began at the middle school level – continued up until class 12, with the form and content increasing somewhat in complexity. A quick look at the CBSE 2024 syllabus for English writing shows that not much has changed in the years since I finished school. Although now, in addition to essays, and letters, and summaries, children are also taught to write messages and notes.

A part of me felt validated to see the practices of essay composition, letter-writing, and diary-entries continue to provide generations of students with opportunities to hone their language skills, express their thoughts and emotions, and connect with others through the written word. And yet, I wondered if we were missing something crucial. A majority of our communication today is nearly instantaneous and occurs through digital platforms. So, even if the traditional writing exercises remain useful in helping students structure their thoughts, it is important to recognize that digital communication has given rise to new modes of literary expression and communication. Doing so would urge us to rethink our approach to teaching writing in ways that are relevant for our digital and socially mediated world.

Digital literature for a digital world

The world of digital literature is a vast expanse of creativity and connection, beyond the limitations of pen and paper. Think of posts on your WordPress blog or Substack, tweets on X (formerly, Twitter) as



Some forms of digital literature

Hypertext fiction: A non-linear style of storytelling, this genre uses hypertext links and allows readers to choose the links they follow and the form the story takes. An interesting example is *I Have Said Nothing*, by J Yellowlees Douglas.

Interactive fiction: Using gaming software, this is a real-time storytelling format that allows users to make decisions for their characters and move along in the story. An example is Emily Short's *Savoir-Faire*.

Locative narrative: This form takes users or readers through an immersive experience by having them listen to audio tapes about a specific location. Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice* is a locative narrative that users experience while taking a tour of London.

Visual novel: A form of digital interactive fiction with multiple storylines and more than one ending, this genre is often associated with video games. This genre is especially popular in Japan, where it originated. An example is Key's Japanese visual novel, *Clannad*.

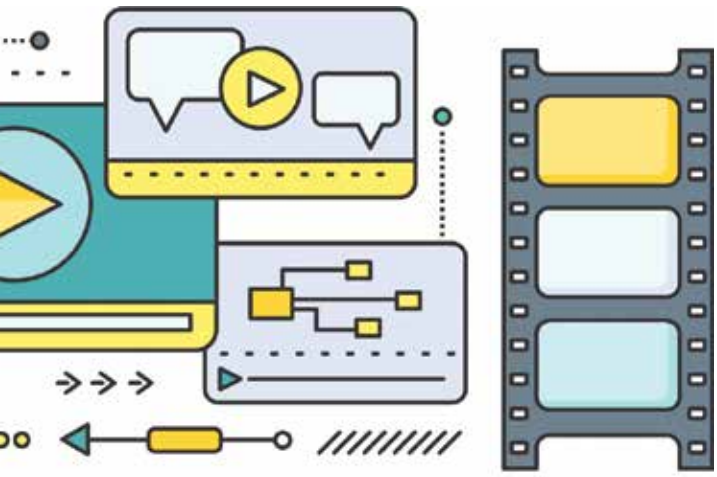
Video poetry: A poem accompanied by a video, this audio-visual genre involves the use of video recordings or graphics to complement the narration of a poem. An example is *We Keep Searching* published on YouTube.

Generators: Telling a story through an algorithm or code, this genre enables readers to choose between their preferred words, phrases, and media that come together to form unique stories. Some examples are Nick Monfort's *Taroko Gorge*, a poetry generator, and *Novelling*, an online novel about writing that combines text, audio, and video.

Flash poetry: Also known as 'cyber poetry', this form used the once-popular software, Flash, to animate a word, a line, or an entire poem into a work of animation. Today, it denotes the use of interactive features and multimedia elements like graphics or animation. Komninos' cyberpoetry site has a few notable examples.

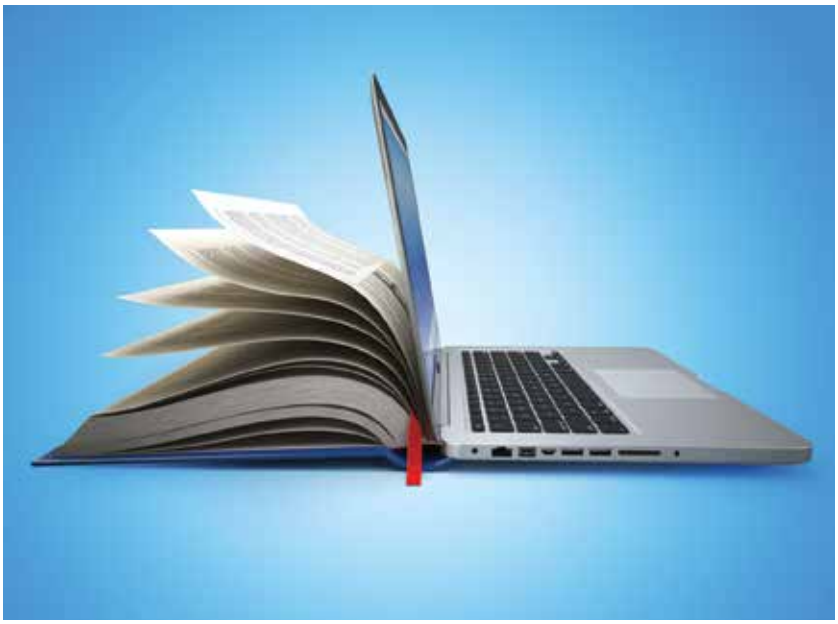
Twitterature: Enabling users to write and share prose as well as poetry, this form is confined to the 280-character limit of the microblogging site, X.

Instapoetry: A sub-genre of poetry that uses typewritten fonts and drawings, this form is popularly used on Instagram where users write their poems.



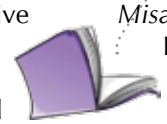
Twitterature, posts or carousels of poetry on Instagram, and so forth, where people use technology to write as well as present a piece of writing. Interestingly, where and how the writing is presented determines whether a piece of work can be considered digital writing. For example, if you wrote a novel on a blogging platform or any of the aforementioned microblogging platforms, and interacted with your readers and audiences, your work would be labelled as 'digital literature'. However, if you merely wrote your novel on your laptop or computer (or any other digital device), and printed it, you wouldn't necessarily be credited for creating digital literature.

I would also be remiss not to mention the sundry ways in which people write or create "content" today. There's hypertext fiction, flash poetry, interactive fiction, locative narrative, text adventure, visual novel,



video poetry, and generators (see box). You'll notice that the content or literature is not limited to text, but includes sounds, visuals, images, charts, graphics, videos or moving images. I'm told there are several platforms (beyond social media platforms) for interactive storytelling and collaborative writing to explore, experiment, and engage with the written word in newer and more creative ways. Twine, for instance, is an open-source tool that allows users to interact and share non-linear stories, and Playfic is an online community that lets users write, play, and share text-based games with each other. Wattpad and Storybird are other web-based platforms that allow users to share their creative works.

Alongside these, Twitterature and Instapoetry have garnered popular attention and emerged as prominent examples of digital literary forms. Several authors have tweeted out entire novels, while others share their romantic musings or pearls of wisdom on Instagram. *Small Places* by Nicholas Belardes and *The Good Captain* by Jay Bushman, tweeted in 2007 and 2008, are considered the first Twitter novels. The popularity of Lang Leav's poems on Instagram was noticed by Andrews McMeel Publishing. Widely regarded as the first success story of Instapoetry, Leav signed a deal with the publishing house for her book, *Love and Misadventure*. More recently, Rupi Kaur's collection of poems was published in her book, *Milk and Honey*, which sold more than 11 million copies! These successes have inspired countless authors and poets to share their digital writing with their friends and followers.



Lay the foundation, and then innovate

Introducing digital literature to the classroom would free today's children from the constraints of traditional formats, especially since they are digital natives, having grown up in an era when digital media are commonplace. Their communication practices involve a persistent exchange of images, voice notes, videos, GIFs, memes through a variety of instant messaging apps. And so, wouldn't it be severely limiting if the extent of their writing education was writing essays and formal and informal letters?

By introducing children to digital literature, we encourage them to think and express themselves in different ways, fostering students' creativity. However, I do realize that we must remember to balance the allure of technology or digital communication with the timeless value of classic literature. Because it's not about abandoning the tried and true methods of writing education, but rather about expanding our toolkit to include the digital tools and techniques that are reshaping our literary landscape. It's about striking a balance between embracing the latest trends and ensuring our pedagogical choices remain rooted in tradition. And finally, it's about cultivating in children a deep and lasting appreciation for literature in all its forms.

For instance, alongside writing descriptive essays or opinion pieces on a given topic, children can be asked to write Twitter threads, captions and carousels for Instagram, and voiceovers for a podcast or radio show.

Rethinking our existing approach in this manner will enable tomorrow's writers to express the thoughts, sounds, and visuals of their imagination. The entire process of writing then becomes an immersive exercise for the writer as well as the reader.

TP

The complex art of translation

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Literary translation may refer to a wide range of activities and phenomena. Whether perceived as the translation of a certain kind or translation of a certain text type, literary translation is among the earliest language professions. Literary translation matters as much as literary creations and may feature among the oldest forms of translation available. One of the reasons why literary translation is so widespread is that it enables literary creations to transcend geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

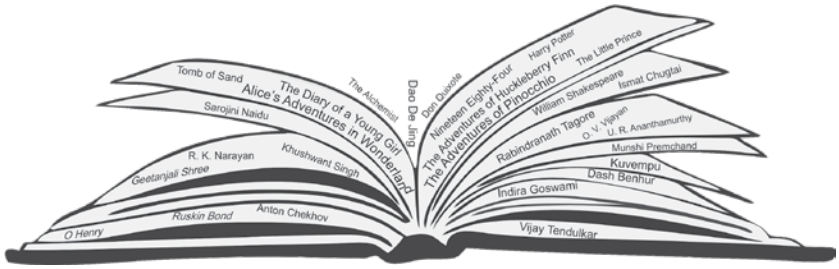
What qualifies as literary translation? Does literary translation refer to literary texts taken up for translation or does it refer to a certain style of translation that is sensitive to aesthetic appeals? In other words, does literary translation concern the nature of the source and target texts or does it concern the process in which the target text is produced? These questions have two parts and both are relevant. The answer to these questions will also have elements of both. The gamut of literary texts is considerably large and the translation of various established categories cannot be discussed in the same breath. That is why literary translation requires an itemised discussion, for each genre displays a unique characteristic. For instance, the translation of poetry and prose will have non-identical sets

Images: Manjula Bevoor

of challenges. This is also true for translating (auto)biography and drama. Literary translation plays a pivotal role in the spread of literary texts across linguistic and geographical borders and intercultural and cross-cultural communications. It would not be wrong to say that literary translation plays a facilitative role in the popularity of literary texts and their conversion into literary masterpieces.

Literary translation as a distinct kind of translation activity poses a multidimensional challenge. The translator of a literary text is entrusted with the responsibility of not only mapping the content from one language to another but also the style and genre. Often, the cultural nuances, gaps, figures of speech and indirect meaning create challenges for the translator. Performing this task, the translator often has to engage in a creative activity called transcreation. Therefore, the question that continues to ignite debates is whether the translators of literary texts should be given credit for creative writing or translation.

Literary translation adds variety to the existing repertoire of literary works in a language. For readers, translators, and language enthusiasts it brings insights related to the variegated ways in which human languages behave. It is an established type of language activity that concerns the translation of literary works from one language to another. In the process, the translator encounters language barriers due to the lexical and structural variations between the source language and the target language. For those engaging in it, literary translation offers



fruitful returns in the form of enhanced awareness about meaning, context, word formation strategies, syntactic constructions, elements of discourse and the overall structure of the pair of languages concerned. It is important to differentiate literary translation from literal translation. Literary translation is the translation in which the source and target texts are literary while literal translation is a translation approach or strategy in which the context of the text does not play any role. Non-literary translation refers to the translation of such texts that do not qualify as literary texts. Scientific papers, books, reports, etc., are examples of non-literary texts.

Literary translation has been as much a component of language classrooms as literature itself. It contributes to the development of language skills and can alter the way individuals perceive different phenomena in life. Readers can easily notice unfamiliar metrical compositions, notably different plots, unfamiliar characters and strikingly different climaxes in plays while reading a literary text in translation. These differences contribute to the creation of new literary texts when the same readers are involved in creative writing and adaptation. While translation is credited with playing a contributory role in the development of a language, literary translation should be credited for enriching the literature of a language and making it accomplished. Therefore, literary translation is vital for the growth of language and literature.

In the initial days of machine translation, literary texts posed the highest degree of challenge and it was assumed that machine translation would never be successful with literary translation. However, since the onset of Open AI, it has become possible to produce writings of literary and creative value. The translation of literary works has also benefited immensely with the development of AI-based tools. The growth in this field is on the rise. The primary source of difficulties is culture-related.

Explication (also referred to as explicitation) is the act of removing obscurity and making things explicit. Due to various factors including cultural norms, it is taboo or prohibited to talk about certain things and phenomena even though words exist for them. When such things and phenomena are to be discussed, people often switch to some other language as if this were an attempt to keep their own language pure and unpolluted. For instance, when visiting a doctor, patients often use English to name body parts even though words are available for the same in the language they speak. It is observed that literature that encounters the restriction of using certain linguistic expressions in one language

and culture becomes free during translation into some other language and culture. Explication is an interesting aspect of literary translation, but it is highly under-researched.

Back translation or reverse translation concerns the translation of the target text into the source language. A similar activity called retranslation or repeat translation refers to multiple instances of the source text translation into the target language. Both back translation and retranslation are used as techniques to assess the competence of translators and the quality of translations. Examining how the 'back translation' and 'retranslation' of literary texts read can be intellectually stimulating. The issue appears lucid at the surface because the literary text in the source language has a pragmatic context, or a theme, or a plot that is to be transferred into the target language. However, problems arise when either the source or the target language exhibits inadequacies of a certain kind during the translation process, for instance in transferring culture-specific concepts and phenomena. Based on shared concepts and syntactic and semantic similarities, one may be tempted to conclude that literary translation between a pair of cognate languages would be easier than a pair of non-cognate languages (for instance, between Gujarati and Hindi rather than between Hindi and Tamil). However, if literary texts embody conceptual structures and contextual themes that are free of linguistic codes, the translation should be easy irrespective of whether the pair of languages concerned share a common ancestry or not.

In addition to proficiency in the pair of languages concerned, a commonly known prerequisite for non-literary translation is the knowledge of the subject matter. Likewise, in literary translation, the translator should possess a taste for literature and a creative sense to maintain style and translate a literary text from one language to another. As translation concerns the transfer of meaning and context, it shares an organic relationship with semantics and pragmatics, two well-recognized sub-fields of linguistics. Literary translation is vital for the growth of literature of any language. It has been instrumental in facilitating understanding of cultures that are seemingly located very far from each other. Some prerequisites to excel in literary translation include a keen interest in literary texts of diverse kinds, an excellent grasp of pragmatic aspects of the languages concerned, skills to understand and employ denotative and connotative meanings, ability to use the figures of speech, and a knack for using expressions bearing pun, irony, and euphemism.

Literary texts in translation can be easily identified by the speakers of the language. In addition to attesting grammatical, ungrammatical, possible and impossible construction, the speakers of a language also possess the ability to distinguish texts of their language from those translated from other languages. All that is required in these exercises is a cursory examination of the style and structure of words and sentences featured in the text.

Religious texts, presenting the best instances of literary creativity, are among the most translated texts in the world. Even if the Bible, Ramayana, Quran, Bhagavad Gita, etc., are left out of the list of most translated texts in the world, it would include literary works from languages such as French, Italian, English, Chinese, German, and Spanish. The Little Prince (translated into over 500 languages), The Adventures of Pinocchio (translated into over 260 languages), Dao De Jing (translated into over 250

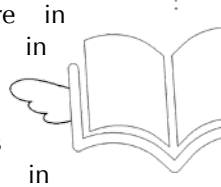
Using translation in the classroom

- Teachers in language classrooms in schools may like to have literary translations in their toolkit. This can happen bidirectionally; (a) teachers can ask students to translate excerpts of literary texts and have a discussion on variations that translated texts will exhibit (b) teachers can translate excerpts of literary texts themselves and then present a comparative table of the source and target texts to the students.
- Further, teachers can ask students to rewrite (intralingual translation) a piece of literary text in a different dialect of the language of the original text.
- Also, teachers can ask students to write down folksongs, lullabies, fairy tales, and songs for various cultural occasions that they hear at home but do not find in books.
- Teachers can also ask students to prepare a project on how literary and rhetoric devices are used in day-to-day communications, though not all of them are available in textbooks and dictionaries.
- A common classroom activity of asking students to write in words what they observe in an image or illustrate in a picture what they read in a text or saw in a video clip is an instance of practice in inter-semiotic translation.
- Language teachers can also ask students to translate idiomatic expressions, proverbs, sayings, punning riddles, etc., from their home language into the language of their classroom. Translation of literary texts can serve as a useful testing tool for language proficiency in a multilingual classroom.
- Identifying equivalents or coining words for translation purposes can be playful and academically rewarding.

These activities will make the students understand their languages as they are and not as they should be according to grammar books.

languages), Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (translated into over 174 languages), and Don Quixote (translated into over 140 languages) are among the most translated literary texts*. Literary works like the Harry Potter series, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Nineteen Eighty-Four, The Diary of a Young Girl* and *The Alchemist* are in the same league of translated texts.

India being a linguistically diverse country presents an interesting case for literary translation. The translations of literary works of prominent writers such as William Shakespeare, Rabindranath Tagore, Munshi Premchand, K. V. Puttapa (Kuvempu), O. V. Vijayan, U. R. Ananthamurthy, Ismat Chugtai, Indira Goswami, Mirza Ghalib, etc., have been extensively used for teaching literature in schools and colleges in India. The demand for translation of works of Indian writers increased manifold in the last two decades of the 20th century and the early two decades of the 21st century. The surge in demand for translation is not only for the pleasure of reading literary works but also for teaching literature in classrooms. Several language departments and programmes at the university level include translated works of Indian writers in their syllabi. Indian literature in translation has emerged as a serious course in various university departments. In India, Sahitya Akademi which functions as the national agency for literary activities also encourages literary translation through awards and publication. The novel *retsamadhi* written by Geetanjali Shree in 2018 and



*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_literary_works_by_number_of_translations

its English translation (Tomb of Sand) by Daisy Rockwell won the International Booker Prize in 2022. International recognitions of this kind for literary translation may galvanize the authoring and translation of literary works in India.

Translation is more frequently used in language teaching and language learning activities than generally acknowledged. The use of translation in language education programmes often employs the translation of literary texts from various genres and sub-genres. It is important to note here that the first published instances of some literary works in India are, in fact, translations. A significant number of literary works that existed in oral forms in India have started gaining written and printed forms through translation. The newness with which these works capture the richness of nature and account for the diversity of human experiences can amply support the teaching of literature in Indian classrooms. Teachers and learners can relate to the texts as well as the context of the literary work made available to them through translation. They will connect with the plot and characters of the literature reaching them in translation. In the Indian scenario, the literary works first get translated into English and then into other languages. This process increases the number of languages in which the translation can probably take place, however, it also poses a genuine risk of losing the cultural uniqueness when English acts as a pivot language for translation between languages of India.

The reproduction of literary works in (the modern form of) the same language is known as intralingual translation. For instance, most of Shakespeare's plays reached English and non-English readers in translated forms. For English readers, these works were instances of intralingual translation, whereas for non-English readers these works were instances of interlingual translations. The English translation of the Odia stories of Jitendra Narayan Dash (popularly known as Dash Benhur) and the English translation of the Marathi plays of Vijay Tendulkar are well known in literary circles for creating an impact on young minds. Authors of Indian origin such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Munshi Premchand, Khushwant Singh, and R. K. Narayan commanded great respect for their literary works, which are frequently taken up for translation. Very often, our knowledge of these literary greats is due to literary translation of their creative writings and the inclusion of the same in the syllabi of language classrooms.

Literary translation plays an integrative role in society. It has a tremendous potential to inspire action among individuals, especially in times of crisis and it can contribute to the overall development of personality. Often, wisdom encapsulated in literature received in translated form gets immersed in the readers and thereby inspires new thinking and action, especially in critical moments of life. Therefore, literary translation is an organic component of language teaching and testing programmes. Justifiably, literary translation in language syllabi and classrooms has become a regular phenomenon.

TP

Bringing good books to children – in Telugu

Giridhar Rao

The interviewer teaches at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. His courses focus on language and literature pedagogy, and language and power in education. He blogs in English on these themes at bolii.blogspot.com. Giridhar has translated the writings of Gandhi and Manto into Esperanto. He is a member of the *Akademio de Esperanto*. He can be reached at rao.giridhar@apu.edu.in.

"Good children's literature is necessary for Telugu's health"

– Suresh Kosaraju

"Our publishing house, *Manchi Pustakam* ("Good Book" in Telugu) turns 20 this year. So this is a good time to reflect on what we have been able to do," says Suresh Kosaraju. What follows is a wide-ranging conversation with Suresh, the Hyderabad-based, 65-year-old publisher of Telugu children's literature.

"Bala Sahiti", which was the foundation stone for Manchi Pustakam, was set up in 1990 and published around 30 books. "Bala Sahiti" ceased publication in 2002. From 2002, first as an unregistered organization and then as a registered public trust

Photos courtesy: Suresh Kosaraju

from 2004, Manchi Pustakam has published 500 books.

How many of those are *translations* into Telugu?
Oh, about 60-70%, I would say!

That's quite a lot! Why is the proportion so high?
Our model was Hyderabad Book Trust, which was publishing mostly translations for adults and focussed around progressive literature. We were also dependent on translations because there was a dearth of good original material in Telugu. Also, the books picked up for translations often had good illustrations. National Book Trust published several translated titles in Telugu under their series Nehru Bal Pustakalaya. Children's Book Trust had only a few titles in Telugu. The other major source of reading material for Telugu children was the magazine *Chandamama*.

Yes, and Chandamama was very popular, wasn't it?
Yes, *Chandamama* had already been around for a long time [since 1947, in fact!]. Their illustrations were good. But the themes of their stories were repetitive, with a clear moralistic, didactic tone. There was hardly any other kind of original reading material in Telugu that might appeal to the young reader. So, we looked around.

And you found the books by Progress Publishers, Raduga, and Mir – all founded in the Soviet Union (USSR) during the first half of the 20th century.
Yes! These were books we too had grown up on. There was a wealth of stories there in English as well as in several Indian language translations including Telugu – in many genres: myths, fantasy, folktales, adventure, historical fiction, and science fiction. Beautifully illustrated and rich absorbing stories! We mostly took stories already published in English and Telugu from Progress Publishers and Raduga.

Was it easy to acquire the permissions to translate the material?
With the collapse of the Soviet Union, some of these publishing houses closed down, but the original publishers were duly acknowledged in our translations and reprints. The only thing was that their Telugu translations needed a bit of language editing. We were also able to improve upon the font type and size because of advancements in technology.

What about the translators? Was it easy to find people who could translate these books into Telugu?
Over the years, we have built a network of translators. Initially, the translations were done without any charge. Now, we are able to pay our translators. We have adopted a rate which is neither too high nor too low. If I have to give a suffix to my name, I would prefer "Translator": it has become a passion for me!"

What about the illustrations? Were they adapted for the Telugu readership?
As I mentioned earlier, an advantage with the translations was the illustrations. But one of our concerns was their appropriateness. Western

children, for example, would be shown bathing in a bathtub! There were quite a few such culturally mismatched illustrations for our context. In some such cases, we commissioned fresh illustrations.

How were these books received?

The Soviet books were a hit! Especially, the picture story books by author, artist, and animator, Vladimir Suteev. Another popular author was Nikolai Radlov. His *Picture Stories*, with minimal text and a single page of four frames, allowed the storyteller (and the young reader!) to create their own story around the pictures. In all, we published 60 of these Soviet books. What is more, they continue to be popular with print runs of 2000 copies for every edition of coloured books. Some of these books are now in their 6th reprint!

You mentioned "coloured books". They must be costly?

Yes. The children's literature market is fairly sensitive to prices. However, Manchi Pustakam as a trust is dependent only on sales and has been viable all these years. This is because, during the initial years, overhead expenditures were minimal and we could build a capital of book stocks. The pricing of books is done on the recurring cost (i.e., printing and binding) and all other non-recurring costs, including royalty, are not considered. Thus, our books are reasonably priced and find a favourable response in the market. We are appreciated both for the content and the price of our books!

What about non-fiction books? Does Manchi Pustakam have those too in its catalogue?

Very much so! About 15-20% of our catalogue is science books. We have been lucky. Authors like Arvind Gupta have readily given us permission to translate their works. His *String Games* is a collection of fun-filled activities. It was done as a bilingual edition (Telugu title, *Daaram to aatalu*). Similarly, the popular US science (and science fiction) writer, Isaac Asimov, has a series *How Did We Find Out*. Dr. V. Srinivasa Chakravarthy of IIT Madras has translated these books for us gratis! He has also translated other popular science books and authored several books for us as well as for other publishers.

All these are translations into Telugu, of course. But you do publish bilingual books, don't you?

Yes, for younger readers, when there is very little text, it is possible to accommodate both English and Telugu on the same page along with the illustration.

How have the bilingual books been received?

Well, the theory is that if we present the text both in a language that the reader knows (Telugu) as well as a language that the reader is still learning (English), it will help the reader to go from the known to the unknown. But in our experience, this is debatable!

Debatable? How so?

What often happens is that the reader quickly completes the text in the known language and does not bother to struggle with the unknown language! The reader reads in only one language. So, for most readers, the bilingual book may not be useful. The grandparents of Indians living abroad may relate to the story in Telugu, while the grandchildren understand it in English! Apart from this, there is a strong demand from parents as well as government school teachers for these books. So the bilingual books continue to be popular.

You mentioned the category "younger readers" just now. What are the age categories that you use?

Well, roughly, 5-8, 8-12, 12-14, and 14+. But we don't print the age category on the book. This is because Telugu-reading abilities vary greatly and are changing. We don't want readers to be guided by some "age-appropriate" category. If they find a book interesting, it is for them!

Tell us a little bit about this changing Telugu-reading ability. What is your sense?

The picture is a complicated one, is it not? On the one hand, we have the ASER [Annual Status of Education Report] surveys telling us that a large proportion of 5th and 7th graders in government and low-fee-paying private schools are not able to read even a 2nd grade Telugu text. On the other hand, there is the situation of Telugu students in high fee-paying English-medium schools. Although they may *speak* Telugu at home, Telugu *reading* is disappearing from their lives. Their exposure to written Telugu is very limited. These children are struggling to read even a 50-page Telugu novella; but they will read a 500-page Harry Potter novel in English with ease!

So, it becomes even more necessary to choose compellingly interesting material.

Yes. Fortunately, there are several interesting publishers in the market now. Duckbill, Eklavya, Ektara, Muskaan, Pratham, Tara, Tulika, and many more. But the material available in Telugu is still not enough.

And the situation is likely to remain like this, isn't it?

Or get worse! One impression I have is that 30-40 years ago, readers were proficient in reading and also identified themselves more easily with characters from other cultures. Now that is less evident. While in real life there is a lot of travelling abroad (for study and work, as well as holidaying) and exposure to media, acceptance of other cultures in Telugu books seems to be shrinking. There seems to be a greater emphasis on *Bharatiyata*, "Indianness". So, nowadays, we get asked – "Why are you publishing this kind of non-Indian material?!" This "cultural shrinking" in a global village is a paradox!

But that is not likely to change your commitment to translation, is it?

Not at all! Good children's literature is necessary for Telugu's health! New media is constantly providing us with interesting material. Meanwhile, we ourselves have been actively sourcing original writings in Telugu. For example, since 2017, Manchi Pustakam has been collaborating with Telugu Association of North America (TANA). Every second year, we invite entries for picture stories and novels from Telugu writers all over the world (both adults and children). So far, 28 picture stories and 21 novels have come out of that collaboration! So, this is an exciting time to be publishing in Telugu!

On that optimistic note, thank you very much for this wide-ranging conversation, and all the best for Manchi Pustakam, Suresh!

TP

Rediscovering reading in my native tongue

Venkata Tejah Balantrapu
is a writer and communications professional from Hyderabad. He makes his living writing and by helping others write. In the process, he gets to think about words and their meanings. If you do too, and would like to chat, he can be reached at tejahb@gmail.com.

As a person born a decade before India's 1991 reforms, my access to the wider world outside my small town was through books. Television had limited programming, and radio had faded into irrelevance (for young people, unless you wanted to listen to songs or follow a cricket match). I read, always in English, literature (*literatura* in latin, for 'book-learning') that was available in the local library, and helped me escape what otherwise seemed a dull and boring life. I was from a generation that knew how to spell words like "phlegm" or "chutzpah" but never had to pronounce them. Saying them out loud made no sense in my life, and no one would use them in regular conversations. My world of speech was Telugu, a *weltanschauung* rich with word-choices, dialects, and everyday diversity. Growing up, I never read a word in Telugu, but always spoke it at home. I spoke English at school and my inner-world of imagination and ideas were fuelled by English. I thought in English. I probably thought in Telugu too, but not with intention.

To know a language, truly, is to be able to do three things with it: converse, read, and write, with comfort and felicity. Speaking a language is relatively straightforward for human brains – we just need to soak in the culture where said language is spoken. Learning to read and write, however, requires a lot of effort and practice, perhaps years for most of us, just to acquire some functional skills. Clearly, there is some difference between oral proficiency and writing or reading in a language – they are two different frames to access a language. Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian thinker, argued that the medium influences and transforms the message. If orality and script are two different 'media' – the frame through which language transmits – then there are differences in how language emerges when one speaks, and when one writes.

This is a weird dichotomy: a world of text and a world of speech running parallel to the language they spring from. A K Ramanujan, Indian poet and scholar, famously wrote, "No Hindu ever reads the Mahabharata for the first time." They don't have to 'read' because they have 'heard' it as stories, as music and song, as dance and drama. But when they do start to read the Mahabharata (or the Ramayana), here too they are met with a bewildering choice. These texts

form a *literature*, a set of works of great artistic merit and aesthetic pleasure for their readers. The written form is a more efficient tool to make literature than orality. Writing is secure relative to the spoken word, it enfolds meaning and ideas with letter-compounds (words) to represent them. This is because writing helps address a key problem: the unstable link between a word and its meaning. This is an ancient problem, as old as language itself. In the opening lines of the *Raghuvamsha*, Kalidasa prays and gives praise to the god and goddess who are attached like word and its meaning – so that he too can grasp the ineffable link between word and its meaning. Literature, then, is a textual art that is both transcendental and meaning-collapsing; it binds together ideas, words, and meaning. This allows it to stay timeless for as long as there are readers who can take in its word-bound ideas and make their own meaning from it. This reading of the meaning of literature opens up a sense of agency: as a reader, I will be able to pick up the script, understand the words, make meaning, and take pleasure from reading a text. Should I then not be able to port this ability to a different language too?

Well into my adulthood, I began to read Telugu. First, I had to teach myself the letters and words, and then learn to string them together to generate meaning. The near-instantaneous recognition that I have with English text was missing in Telugu. Despite years of speaking the language, I had to slow down and stitch word and word together to make meaning. In English, when I wish to convey an idea, words seem to pop up without effort. In Telugu, I have to struggle – the words one uses for speech are awkward in text. Everyday Telugu speech also slurs and mixes word pronunciations, but one has to be really comfortable with the text to make those slurries work in writing. At that slow pace, one discovers an instability not just with word and its meaning, but also its spelling and intent. Much like atoms in modern physics, words are no steady and precise objects, they are potentialities thrumming with energy. With time, I managed to assimilate enough of a vocabulary to begin reading text at a reasonable pace. These days, I spend most of my time reading Telugu text online, on literary e-magazines like the lovely *Eemata*. This is a new Telugu for me, a world of text, and different from the Telugu I speak.

***

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain…
– 'Translations Necessary' from the Translators' note, preface, King James Version of the Bible, 1611.

There is, however, a world of literature that is just right for me: Telugu translated into English. Translations help me switch between English and Telugu (and with poetry, some Sanskrit), to see how different people collapse meaning and translate it into a different language, and so, a different context. Short story collections (like *The greatest Telugu Stories Ever Told* by Dasu Krishnamoorthy and Tamraparni Dasu, Aleph 2022), novellas (like *The Liberation of Sita* by Lalita Kumari (Volga), HarperCollins, 2016), or even short excerpts of

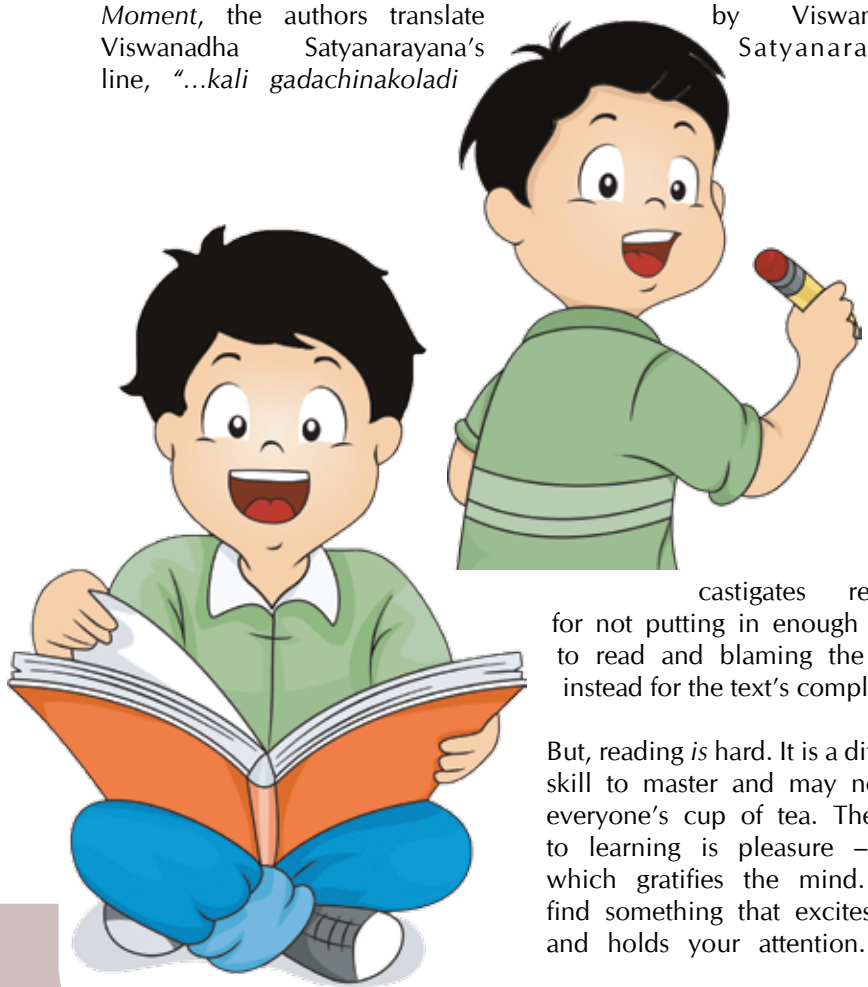
poems, *Chaatuvu* in Telugu (like *A Poem at the Right Moment* by V Narayana Rao and David Shulman, University of Chicago press, 1998) are all welcome portals where I can switch between the Telugu and English versions and reap the pleasure of the text's mastery in both worlds. Translations show up the stark impossibility of taking a word and moving its meaning from one language to another. Those translations that aim for a literal truth fall short of both the original and its recipient language. Finding the right word in a different language is more fraught and unstable than finding the right word to make the original.

My top 10 translation picks

This is a short selection of books in translation that I read and took pleasure from. Hopefully, you will find in this list a book to start your journey of reading translated books.

- **Girls for Sale** (*Kanyasulkam* by Gurajada Appa Rao); translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao, Penguin Classics, 2011 (With a fantastic cover image, *Bride* by Damerla Rama Rao, artist from Rajahmundry who died tragically young).
- **Folk tales from India**; by A K Ramanujan, Penguin 2009.
- **A Poem at the Right Moment**; collected and translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, University of California press, 1998.
- **Classical Telugu Poetry: an Anthology**; edited and translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, Oxford University Press, 2002.
- **God on the Hill: Temple Poems from Tirupathi**; Annamayya translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, Oxford university press, 2005.
- **The Liberation of Sita** (Volga), Translated by T Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayashree, HarperPerennial, 2018.
- **The Story of Manu** (*Manucharitramu*, Allasani Peddanna), Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, Murthy Classical Library of India, 2015.
- **Telugu: The Best Stories of Our Times**, edited by Volga, translated by Alladi Uma and M Sridhar, HarperPerennial, 2022.
- **The Greatest Telugu Stories Ever Told**, Dasu Krishnamoorthy and Tamraparni Das, Aleph, 2022.
- **Russian Classics [Telugu]** – translated into Telugu by Kunaparaju Kumar, Anvikshiki publishers, 2019 (This last book is in the other direction – famous Russian short stories translated into Telugu).

The opening lines of the *Odyssey* in the original Greek calls the text's hero, Odysseus, *polytropos*. The *Odyssey* has been translated many times into English over the years, and each translator picks a different English word for *polytropos*: prudent, shrewd, resourceful, many-fortuned. Robert Fagles, in his translation, begins: "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course..." (The Odyssey, Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, 1999). My favourite translation, though, is by Emily Wilson. She chooses the straight: "Tell me about a complicated man. Muse..." (The Odyssey, Emily Wilson, Norton, 2017). Telugu translations too have to make many such choices. In *A Poem at the Right Moment*, the authors translate Viswanadha Satyanarayana's line, *"...kali gadachinakoladi chitragatulanchalagun"* as "strange are the ways of this dying age." The word *Kali* refers to the fourth age in Hindu cosmology, the *Kali Yuga*. As it is the last age, winding down into dissolution and deprivation, the phrase "dying age" sounds appropriate, but one can think of other terms too: "end times", for example. In all these translations, the aim is to convey intent but not always the literal meaning. The translator takes pains to ensure that the meaning they make into the new language carries the essence of the original. Therefore, as a reader too, it behoves me (and all those who read such texts) to read them with intent and effort. In fact, the full verse in the original by Viswanadha Satyanarayana castigates readers for not putting in enough effort to read and blaming the poet instead for the text's complexity.



But, reading *is* hard. It is a difficult skill to master and may not be everyone's cup of tea. The key to learning is pleasure – that which gratifies the mind. You find something that excites you and holds your attention. You are willing to come back, again and again, and in the process you read. It then inspires you with ideas that are complex and need to be worked out. This you do on a piece of paper (or on a document on your computer): you write. Those who are willing to put in the effort must contend with the instability of words and their meanings. They must also contend with the contours of the language they choose to operate in. And yet, the pleasures of text are many. Reading offers the satisfaction of unpacking dense meanings from seemingly simple, even ambiguous, sentences. While it is no replacement for lived experience, for many of us, reading is the closest thing to travel and to access memories of travels past. In the end, when all life must submerge back into the noise of world, it is the words we leave behind that have any hope of surviving into the future.

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Stories and the spoken word

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Stories may be shaped by the world, but stories in turn shape the world. The stories people tell govern their view or reality, and determine their perception of the world. The picture of the universe shifts from tongue to tongue.

Our earliest lessons are in the form of stories told by parents and grandparents. Since ancient times, human beings have depended on the word of mouth to transfer culture from one generation to another. Words began to assume meaning when they were transmitted from one person to another through different telling styles, languages, and methodologies. These methodologies became the pillars of oral literature, which formed the basis of language development and effective communication among human beings.

When humans first wandered the Earth, they were survivors. They observed, sensed, and smelt the trees, animals, and the Earth to fulfill their basic needs. They hunted for meat and protected themselves from the rain and storms. Each lived alone and found no time or need to speak.

Years later, they found other similar humans on the other side of the shore. They were anxious, tense, angry, envious, and friendly all at the same time. They began to communicate with the help of sounds, gestures, and paintings on cave walls to express their environment.

Soon humans struck fire and settled around the fire, cooking the meat they had hunted, sharing the food

and their experiences of hunting. They gathered themselves as a tribe. Tribal communities around the world shared tales using animal and bird sounds, indicating a gamut of expressions, meanings, and experiences. These sounds eventually became words and words became sentences.

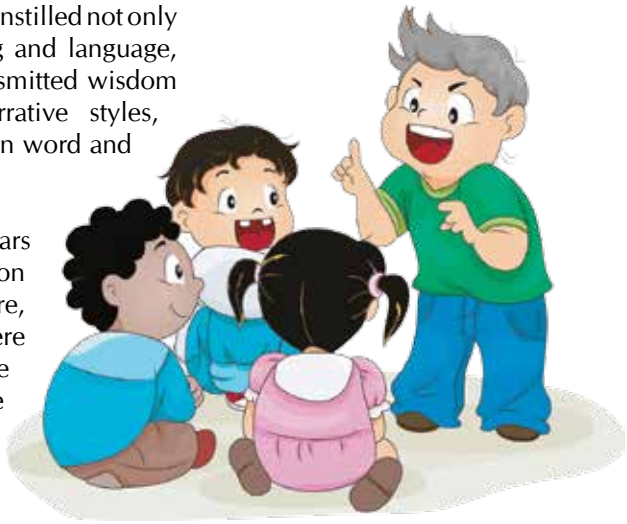
Tribal communities, now, began to ask many how and why questions. "How did the elephant get its trunk?" "Why is the sky so limitless?" They built myths, legends, fables, and folktales around these questions which became folklore.

These folktales encapsulated folk knowledge, which was transmitted to their children, grandchildren, communities from generation to generation. These narratives did not have any particular structure or pattern. Stories began with sharing of experiences involving the teller and the listener. These stories got crystallized and consolidated as oral literature and formed the basis of oral tradition.

The oral tradition became a system for acquiring, storing, and retrieving cultural articulations and a primary source of shared understanding and wisdom. The oral tradition was lodged in the mind and memory of people and operated without conscious effort. Through stories and anecdotes and spoken tales, this knowledge preserved traditions and kept values alive.

Stories became the basic means of communication both in the regional and the universal tongue around the world. Language was transacted in different styles as narratives and in the written form as words in novels, textbooks, and books of learning.

Over time, stories instilled not only a love for reading and language, but they also transmitted wisdom from diverse narrative styles, through the spoken word and written texts.



In the early years of the evolution of oral literature, few people were conscious of the complexity of the stories they told. They just spoke, almost entirely unaware of the subtleties of the word choice, of the grammar, of sentence structure, or emphasis. This gift of storytelling and the language they spoke was remarkable, considering that the average adult can pick and choose from a reservoir of some 50,000 words. When voice or vocabulary failed, they called on gestures to take the place of words. Such development of language was an extraordinary achievement.

It is this literature that has made it possible for man to erect civilizations and master the sciences that make human life what it is today. Literature is the primary cause of man's swift and ever-accelerating cultural evolution. From oral literature to the written one, man has progressed from passing on knowledge with stone or bronze tools to inventing electronic communication networks that bind the world together.

At the simplest level, storytelling and speaking are physical actions comparable to walking or lifting things. Countless nerve cells located in the brain coordinate muscles that create meaningful vocal signals. In addition, words, spoken with various tones and accents, constitute overt behaviour. Speech also influences human behaviour. To communicate through stories is to be human.

Most experts refuse to guess how man first invented stories, language, and literature. They believe, the invention probably occurred in many different places at different times. Stories and language did not grow entirely in isolation. Oral literature influenced one another or intermarried and produced offspring.

Today we have so many ways to communicate anecdotes, stories, and feelings. Mobile phones and WhatsApp services help man connect widely, yet briefly. With Artificial Intelligence already a part of our lives, I wonder what sacrifices the spoken word will undergo.

TP

Finding your place in the family of things

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Poetry has saved me from drowning in despair and I believe that it can serve the same function for others too. After all, everyone is in need of something to hold on to – however ephemeral that sense of anchor might be. Can words offer that? Yes, of course! I refrain from submitting myself to one favourite poet though. There is such a wealth of poetry in this world that being polyamorous seems to be the wisest choice when it comes to the world of verse.

Lal Ded is one of the poets I keep returning to. The poems of this 14th century Kashmiri mystic have been translated by Mumbai-based writer, art critic, and cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote. His translations appear in the book *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (2011).

Each of these untitled poems is called a *vakh*. Here's one in translation:

Resilience: to stand in the path of lightning.
Resilience: to walk when darkness falls at noon.
Resilience: to grind yourself fine in the turning mill.
Resilience will come to you.

This book came into my life in my mid-twenties. I can hardly remember what it must have meant to that younger version of me, who was so full of passion and promise, but also so fragile and combustible, so fickle and impressionable. What I do remember is that this poem spoke to me then, and it continues to as I move closer to the end of my thirties – an age where I feel less sure about my certainties, and more at peace with seeing how life unfolds.

As I re-read this poem recently, I thought about how often resilience is misunderstood as submission – the response of a weakling who cannot stand their ground or speak up. With more life experiences under my belt, this assumption seems hasty and even laughable. Resilience comes from acknowledging that our external environment may be slow to change but we can take charge of our inner world and seek refuge in its warmth and spaciousness.

We can refuse to live as a hostage or a victim and remind ourselves of the riches that lie within. The poem cited above is not a call to retreat from the world. It is an affirmation of the courage that lies dormant, and needs to be awakened so that it can spur us to action.

How can teachers create the conditions for students to develop such an intimate relationship with poetry? Can it be taught at all? Is it perhaps enough to hint at its presence, and hope that students will find their

way towards it when they are curious, thirsty, or looking to be rescued? The poetry that I feel mostly deeply connected to did not reach me through a textbook. I stumbled upon it. I imagine that it was looking for me just as I was seeking.

Mary Oliver is another poet I love the company of. She loved being outdoors and in the wild. I do not own any of her books, but they are easy to find online. In her poem "Wild Geese" (1935) on poetry.com, this poet from Cleveland, USA, who passed away in 2019, writes:

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Illustration: Shilpy Lather

I discovered this poem as an adult. I think the teenage version of me would have benefited so much from it when I was bullied repeatedly and mercilessly for being fat and effeminate. Academics seemed to be the only avenue where I could excel. Therefore, even a minor academic setback appeared like a big failure. My self-worth was smashed to smithereens because I was made to believe that it was tied to marks and grades. Thankfully, I have no more school or college examinations to sweat over, but my heart goes out to all the young people who feel so defeated, helpless, and unloved that they end up taking their own lives.

This poem will resonate with so many teenagers who feel like misfits. It reads like a warm hug. It seems to tell the reader: *You are not alone! There is a place for you to blossom and to flourish. Please don't give up just yet.* Poetry can help us tend to our wounds. It has helped me. We cannot transform others with a magic wand but we have the ability to soothe, nourish, and heal ourselves. Through the gift of language available to us, we humans can create thoughts that are empowering. Regardless of what we encounter in the world, we can promise to be kind to ourselves each day. We can steer ourselves towards peace and fulfilment.

There was a time when rage and righteousness made me believe that I had to fix others – people, structures, organizations – in order to be happy but that idea is past its expiry date. When we do not honour our pain and give ourselves the love we need, we end up hurting others. Why don't we talk about these things in our schools? We should, shouldn't we? I have a feeling that we would if we believed that the aim of education is to support self-enquiry.

This brings me to Arundhathi Subramaniam, a poet whose work I have been fortunate to follow for over two decades. Her poem "Arunachala", which appears in the collection *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems* (2009) speaks to me with urgency every time I revisit it. Seated inside the ashram of Ramana Maharishi in Tiruvannamalai, the speaker is looking out at the sacred mountain called Arunachala. The reader gets to hear the inner monologue:

It will come again,
the fear of the darkening flesh,
of watching the self turn to rind.
But for now this is enough.

For somewhere here, I know,
is something black,
something large,
something limpid,
something like home.

When she wrote this poem, Arundhathi used to reside in India. Now she divides her time between India and the United States. Our physical addresses change, our tastes and preferences alter drastically, our appearances undergo a makeover, but that longing for home somehow never leaves us. Or maybe it does, in that fleeting moment when we take a break from the endless search for stimulation and novelty, and lovingly tell ourselves: "But for now this is enough".

TP

The healing pages

How children's literature shapes our worlds

Divya Choudary
works with narrative and design in edtech, drawing on her background in print and new media and children's literature and literacies. She enjoys exploring storyworlds across books and various media, always with a cup of tea in hand. She can be reached at dchoudary@gmail.com.

In the bustling world of education and child development, there exists a magical realm often explored with delight and with luck, in depth – the realm of children's literature. From the whimsical to the profound, these stories are gateways to understanding the complex, vivid inner lives of our youngest readers. As Maurice Sendak might have hinted, it's where the wild thoughts are. Children's literature serves as a powerful tool for psychological and emotional development. Drawing on Rudine Sims Bishop's insightful metaphor, children's literature acts as a mirror reflecting young readers' inner worlds, offers windows into diverse lives and cultures, and opens doors to vast new realms of possibility.

A heart, lost and found

I was nine when my dad passed away in an accident – a time when life's complexities seemed far beyond my grasp, yet suddenly demanded recognition. In the wake of his loss, the world felt like a puzzle with a piece forever missing. Story books, a place of adventure and friendship until then, soon became my sanctuary. Feelings too tangled for words found expression. As I navigated through my own journey of loss, children's books were not just an escape but a means of navigating through the fog of grief.

Decades later, I stumbled upon Oliver Jeffers' *The Heart and the Bottle*. Jeffers' tale, with its poignant exploration of loss, grief, and the protective shells we build around our hearts, resonated with me on a level I hadn't anticipated. It taught me that it's okay to protect our hearts, but it's also okay to feel, to experience the full breadth of human emotions. This, I believe, is the essence of children's literature: to keep us company through the darkest of times and to show us the infinite possibilities of the human heart.

As I sit here writing, surrounded by shelves filled with children's books I've grown up with, I'm struck by the pivotal role these narratives have played in my personal journey. From the innocence of childhood to the introspection of adulthood, they've not only offered solace and escape but have also guided me in the journey of finding and becoming myself.

Mirror: reflecting the Self

The stories we grow up on, and the ones we pass on, are not just tales. They often mimic the structure of real-life experiences in a controlled, coherent manner, helping children make better meaning of reality. They offer a foundation for self-reflection, self-soothing, and psychological scaffolding. These stories uniquely address complex issues like fear, confusion, and uncertainty providing children with a safe space to explore feelings that are often difficult to express and seldom discussed – such as rejection, failure, loss, loneliness, and shame. Children identify with characters they admire or relate to, recognizing themselves in characters' triumphs and struggles.

By presenting these themes in accessible, often metaphorical ways, these stories help young readers navigate, articulate, and manage their feelings, comforting them with the knowledge that they are not alone.

Like *The Heart and the Bottle*, Patrick Ness's heart-wrenching book *A Monster Calls* serves as a compass for navigating grief. In the story, 13-year-old Conor grapples with his mum's illness, a journey fraught with complex emotions like guilt, acceptance, and responsibility. The monster, a pivotal figure in the narrative emphasizes the profound role of storytelling, telling Conor, "Stories are important. They can be more important than anything. If they carry the truth." The monster further deepens this insight by noting, "Because humans are complicated beasts," and goes on to explain the dual nature of human belief, saying "Your mind will believe comforting lies while also knowing the painful truths that make those lies necessary..." While this narrative helps young adult readers process these emotions, it simultaneously highlights the role of stories as a language for the subconscious, reflecting Carl Jung's emphasis on the power of narrative to access and understand our deeper selves. It teaches children and adults alike the importance of confronting their truths, no matter how difficult, and affirming that their feelings and fears are valid and should be expressed.

In *The Dark*, Lemony Snicket and Jon Klassen personify darkness, providing young readers a visual narrative that encourages them to confront and engage with their fears. *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak follows Max as he confronts his "monsters," enabling children to explore their anger and "wild" sides before returning to a place of safety and love, thereby offering a model for self-regulation. Both stories serve as metaphors for managing emotions, suggesting that awareness of these feelings can improve one's ability to deal with them.

Navigating these emotional landscapes, children encounter Jungian archetypes – universal, symbolic elements that resonate deeply within our collective unconscious. Such archetypes, including the wise old mentor, shape-shifting creatures, and journeys into the unknown, are prevalent in stories like *The Adventures of Pinocchio, Harry Potter*, and *His Dark Materials*. For instance, *Harry Potter* extensively uses Jungian archetypes: Harry represents the hero, Voldemort the shadow, and Hermione and Ron embody the anima and animus, Jung's terms for the feminine and masculine aspects of a person's unconscious. Similarly, in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, dæmons metaphorically represent the complex nature of human beings. These dæmons symbolize inner psychic companionship, illustrating how personal growth is achieved by embracing and integrating different aspects of oneself. These archetypal stories enable children to see beyond their immediate surroundings and pave the way for further exploration into the realms of fantasy and reality.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis

Illustrations: Divya Choudary

Carroll offers a whimsical albeit deep dive into the concepts of identity and self-discovery. Alice's journey through Wonderland serves as a mirror for psychological self-exploration, helping readers contemplate their own identity and place in a world that is big and bewildering. Similarly, Bill Watterson's comic *Calvin and Hobbes* captures the essence of childhood curiosity and the boundless realms of imagination, while also providing a grounding contrast through its portrayal of adults. This juxtaposition helps children navigate the friction they may face from the expectations imposed by the adult world. Through the adventures of a boy and his tiger, readers can delve into philosophical inquiries, and explore deep existential thoughts, humorously wrapped in the innocence of play.

From enduring classics to contemporary books and narrative video games, characters' stories not only illustrate the universal and intimately personal journey of finding order in chaos and cultivating self-understanding but also open a lens to a broader worldview.

Windows: gazing into Other's lives

Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping a healthy identity and broadening worldviews. By serving as a window into others' lives, it allows children to experience the world from different perspectives, fostering empathy and understanding. Through stories, children can learn about how people live in different times, situations, places, and cultures. It teaches them the language needed to respectfully question and critically engage with these differences. This emotional literacy is key in developing social skills, resilience, and a sense of morality.

For instance, Morris Gleitzman's *Then* offers a poignant window into the resilience required during World War II. I remember being deeply moved by the struggles of the children, Felix and Zelda, as they navigated the perils of the war. The story profoundly explores resilience, empathy, and the human spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity. It gives readers a window into the harrowing realities of life in Poland during the Holocaust, offering them a glimpse into the past that is both educational and deeply moving. Stories like *Then* can prompt discussions about moral choices, the value of friendship, and the impacts of war on children, refugees, and society.

Mirror by Jeannie Baker is a wordless picture book that juxtaposes the daily lives of a family in Australia with that of a family in Morocco. On the left pages, readers view a day in the life of the Australian family, and on the right, the Moroccan family. This side-by-side layout highlights both the differences and the similarities between the two cultures, emphasizing a shared sense of family and routine. This unique juxtaposition in multicultural children's literature allows readers to see how people across the world view themselves. It helps children understand that, despite superficial differences, the emotional landscapes of day-to-day life – emotions like love, happiness, fear, and loss – are universally shared.

One of my favourites, T.J. Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea* blends humor, warmth, and profound life lessons into a rich narrative. The novel masterfully addresses the psychological concept of the 'other,' illustrating how love can bridge even the most seemingly insurmountable gaps. Though wrapped in fantasy, this story firmly roots readers in the reality that understanding and love can foster family in the unlikeliest of places and situations. Imbued with themes of acceptance, identity, and belonging, the story speaks directly to the emotional needs of young readers, deepening their understanding of diversity and empathy and their implications for real-world interactions.

Characters in children's books often form unlikely friendships that cross boundaries of species, class, or even worlds, beautifully illustrating the universal value of friendship. These stories reveal how friends can differ significantly yet still offer care and support to one another. For example, in A.A Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, the endearing bonds of friendship between Christopher Robin and his animal friends are depicted through lessons in kindness and acceptance. Similarly, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett explores these themes through Mary Lennox's journey. Children are introduced to the complexities of human nature and societal norms of the time, examining how social status and the relationship between wealth and morality affect individuals. This classic not only highlights the harsh realities of loneliness and neglect but also celebrates transformation and redemption, making it a poignant exploration of the enduring power of friendship.

Children's stories that serve as windows encourage empathy, cooperation, conflict resolution,

and reveal to children that beneath surface differences lie universal feelings and desires, fostering an inclusive mindset from a young age. This broadened understanding invites readers to take another step – toward exploring even more expansive realms of thought and possibility.

Doors: the thresholds of imagination

Some stories do more than reflect and reveal; they invite new ways of thinking and being, encouraging children to question "what is" and imagine "what if". These narratives act as doors encouraging children to engage with their present and envision who they might become. Drawing on the work of Lev Vygotsky, psychologists suggest that imagination is not merely a source of creativity but also a fundamental building block of language and cognitive development. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory posits that cognitive functions are deeply embedded in and influenced by social interactions. He believed that imaginative contexts provided by stories enhance children's language skills and their capacity for critical thinking, problem-solving (questioning, predicting, inferring), and comprehension within the framework of meaningful social interactions.

Jean Piaget, a pioneer in developmental psychology, further reinforces this perspective by noting that imaginative play is crucial for children's cognitive development. According to Piaget, children move through distinct stages of cognitive development. Through children's literature, young readers engage in mental simulations that allow them to experiment with and understand complex scenarios and abstract concepts, making the transition from concrete operational thought – where they handle tangible objects and ideas – to more abstract, theoretical thinking, thus effectively opening doors to new cognitive realms.

Vygotsky's concept of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) also illustrates how children's literature functions as a transformative "door" serving as a scaffold that helps young readers move from their current understanding to higher levels of comprehension. The ZPD refers to the difference between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner, such as a teacher or through the narratives in literature. Characters and narrators within stories often assume the role of "More Knowledgeable Others," guiding readers through "doors" into new realms of understanding and maturity.

The Rabbit Listened by Cori Doerrfeld exemplifies this by opening a 'door' to the often-overlooked power of listening. Through its simple yet profound narrative and heartwarming illustrations, the book depicts the young character Taylor dealing with disappointment and sadness. Guided by the quiet support of a compassionate rabbit, Taylor's experience contrasts

with interactions involving other animals who offer well-intentioned but overwhelming advice. This story uniquely highlights the importance of being present and providing silent solidarity in times of need, promoting a deeper appreciation of emotional support among young readers.

In *Skellig*, David Almond crafts a narrative where the mundane and magical intersect, revealing a world ripe with possibility. The story, enriched by the observation that "Truth and dreams are always getting muddled," invites children to ponder the possibilities of the unknown and the unseen forces that shape our lives. As Michael, the young protagonist, engages with Skellig, who may be part angel, part pre-historic creature, he embarks on a transformative journey of hope, healing, and discovery. This story nudges children towards exploring beyond the visible world, inspiring a sense of wonder and the courage to believe in the extraordinary amidst the ordinary.

By viewing the world through characters like Scout Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, young readers gain insight into justice, empathy, and the importance of respecting others and defending what is right. Such stories reassure readers that bravery manifests in various forms and that kindness is a powerful force capable of transforming realities, both within and outside the pages. These stories empower readers to take actionable steps toward social change, inspiring them to apply the lessons learned within these narratives to real-world situations. They challenge young readers not just to reflect but to act, demonstrating that individual efforts can collectively create a more equitable and compassionate world.

Building on a rich legacy, newer titles in children's literature address contemporary issues such as diversity, mental health, and environmental concerns, reflecting the rapidly evolving landscape of children's realities. As children's literature expands beyond traditional forms, embracing mediums like video games and extended reality technologies that offer even more immersive experiences, it provides "doors" to vibrant spaces where young readers can explore and influence expansive worlds.

Horizon Zero Dawn developed by Guerrilla Games exemplifies this evolution, with its open world and narrative choices. The narrative allows players to explore at their own pace and make decisions that significantly impact the world and its characters. This interactive environment merges the magic of storytelling with technological innovation, inviting players to step through a "door" into a realm where they can experiment with and ponder complex themes, merging imaginative play with strategic thinking and ethical decision-making. The protagonist, Aloy, a young hunter in a world overrun by robotic creatures, embarks on a quest that promises personal discovery and offers insights into societal impacts and the consequences of technological advancement, illustrating the dynamic future of children's stories.

Beyond pages: role of educators in guiding literary experiences

Children's literature, with its unique blend of simplicity

and depth, lays a foundational understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Through characters that resonate with authenticity and scenarios that stretch the boundaries of reality, it encourages young readers to question, dream, and explore, providing a healing journey through which they acquire the language, skills, and coping strategies needed to navigate their own life challenges. Even in this ever-evolving digital age, where stories are accessible in countless formats across various platforms, the essence of children's literature remains unchanged: it serves as a catalyst for dialogue, a source of insight, and a companion in the most personal of quests – for knowledge, understanding, and self-acceptance.

Educators play a pivotal role in unlocking the full potential of these narratives, guiding these explorations thoughtfully. The windows, mirrors, and doors framework is a valuable tool for educators to examine and enhance their curricula. By carefully selecting stories that convey diverse worldviews, reflecting on their own experiences, facilitating discussions, and creating spaces that encourage exploration and connection, educators can help young readers navigate the complex emotions and situations these stories depict, thereby enriching the educational experience.

As we engage with these narratives, from the fantastical to the everyday, we cultivate a culture rich in curiosity and creativity and reconnect with the timeless tradition of storytelling. The exploration of children's literature is a meaningful journey not only for the young but for anyone eager to guide, share, and learn together. Every story invites us into a dialogue – a conversation that is just waiting to begin.

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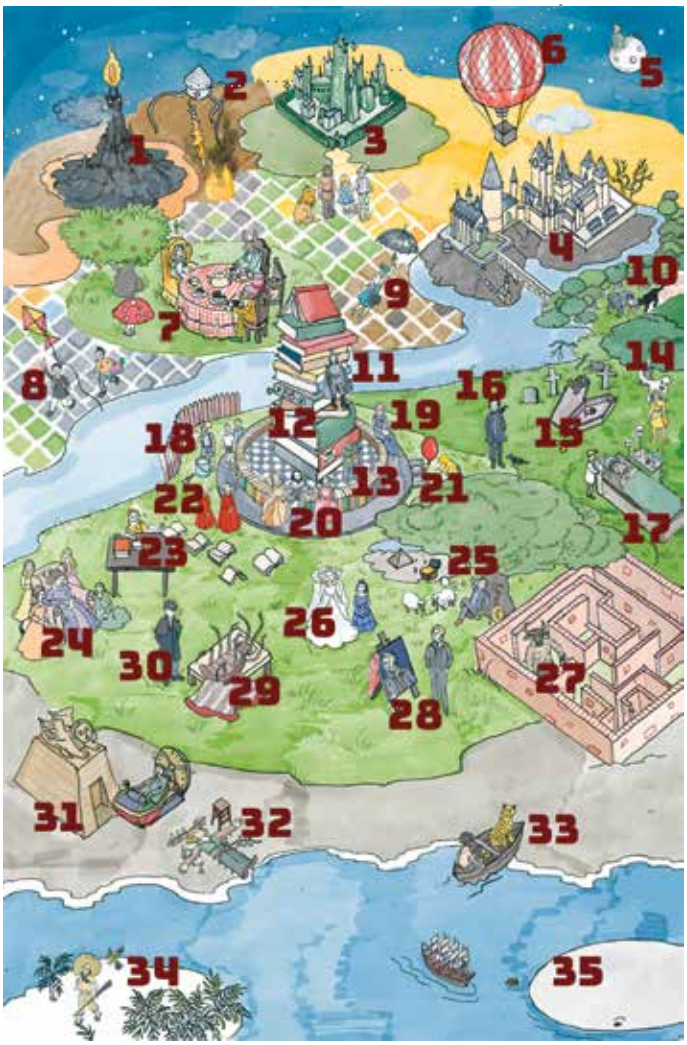
Answer key



1) Lord of the Rings 2) War of the Worlds 3) The Wonderful Wizard of Oz 4) Harry Potter 5) The Little Prince 6) Five Weeks in a Balloon 7) Alice in Wonderland 8) The Kite Runner 9) Mary Poppins 10) The Jungle Book 11) V for Vendetta 12) 1984 13) Maus 14) Betaal Pachisi 15) Dracula 16) Edgar Allan Poe 17) Frankenstein 18) The Adventures of Tom Sawyer 19) Rabindranath Tagore 20) William Shakespeare 21) It 22) Handmaid's Tale 23) Matilda 24) Little Women 25) The Alchemist 26) Great Expectations 27) House of Asterion 28) The Picture of Dorian Gray 29) Metamorphosis 30) Sherlock Holmes 31) The Time Machine 32) Gulliver's Travels 33) Life of Pi 34) Robinson Crusoe 35) Moby Dick

When the stories we tell – and read – are real

Usha Raman

Normally when we think of literature and storytelling, we tend to restrict ourselves to fiction, particularly when we are thinking about what qualifies as "creative writing". However, I'd like to suggest that ALL writing is a creative act, whether we are telling fictional stories or "true" stories. The act of writing demands that we think about beginnings, middles, and ends, tailor the structure and style to the purpose we want to achieve, and what we want the reader to take away from it. There's no doubt, though, that the specific ways in which rules of language, style, and structure are applied to expressive writing (such as fiction or poetry) are different from how they are applied to writing whose main purpose is to inform, or explain, or clarify something. This "something" could be a set of facts, a process, or a phenomenon of some kind (natural, social, historical, cultural, etc.). Textbooks are full of facts and explanations, but most often, they are not full of stories, and I am sure not many of us read textbooks for pleasure. Yet, there is a whole genre of literature that focuses on the real, on well-researched facts, and builds arguments based on carefully gathered evidence. In fact, some publishing analysts say that non-fiction books have seen much higher sales than fiction in recent years, suggesting that people are choosing to read not just for recreation, but for learning as well! Such stories allow us to learn in different ways, by finding out about what people did and how they did it, by giving us a clearer picture of how certain events unfolded and who was involved, and why, or by showing us how a discovery or invention came about – not just the science but the human interactions behind it.

ACTIVITY: Ask the students to go to a local bookstore, or if they are travelling, to take note of the books displayed prominently. Can they be put into categories? How many of them are non-fiction?

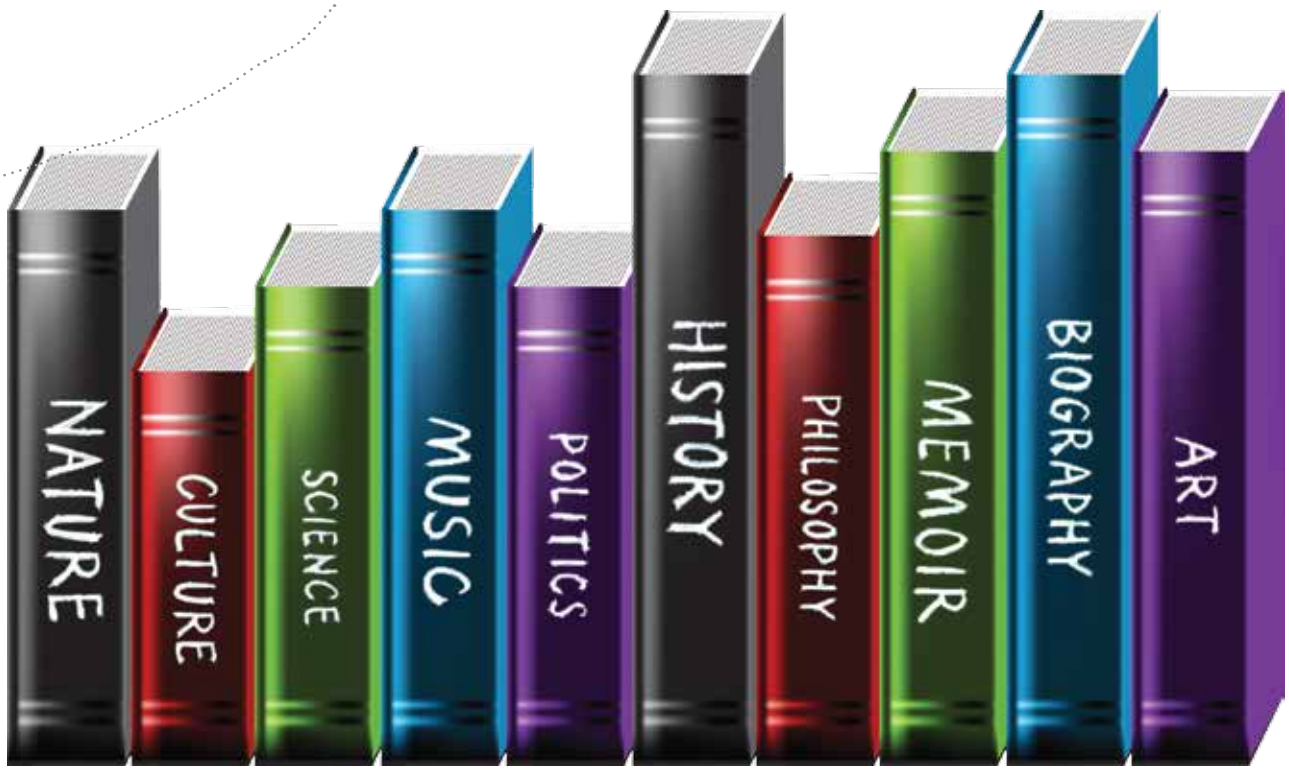
One of the most common genres of non-fiction storytelling, something many of us consume every day, is journalism – the stories we find in the newspaper or on news websites. Journalists follow an accepted method and structure to tell these stories, based on their reporting – interviewing people, reading through documents, attending meetings, or observing events. Most stories use what is called the "inverted pyramid" to narrate the news, beginning with the most important facts and ending with the least important. And then there are the feature stories, which are longer, more detailed articles that offer greater depth, using description and anecdotes, weaving in quotes that seem to almost be like dialogue in a novel. Such stories aim to go beyond the simple re-tellings

of everyday events and give us the background and the details, much like a storyteller who paints a rich picture of the context and characters as she weaves a narrative that holds you in thrall.

READ AND DISCUSS: Working in pairs, students read through the newspaper and try to identify different kinds of stories. What are the various kinds of stories they can find? Do they see how they are structured differently? What sorts of information goes into each kind of story? How are the longer stories different from or similar to fictional short stories?

This exercise will get them thinking about what makes a story. It's not always about plot – though that is of course important, sometimes even in non-fiction. It's not always about imagination – though this is not entirely absent from non-fiction. The best written non-fiction is compelling because it is modelled on the classic elements of good fiction. There is a clear progression of facts/events; there is something that moves the narrative forward in a way that you want to know what comes next; there is good use of description of different kinds; and there is always a link to the human element. The weekend supplements of most newspapers will have features that can be brought in as examples of popular non-fiction writing. Profiles, for instance, are a staple of journalistic writing, and you could ask children to find a piece from a magazine or newspaper about someone they admire (a cricketer, a film star, a social activist, an artist) and discuss it with reference to how it tells the story of the person.

An easy way to introduce non-fiction narratives into a middle or high school class might be to draw from the diaries of explorers and naturalists, or from memoirs and biographies of famous people. Such reading could be integrated into subject classes. For instance, Gerald Durrell's books about his encounters with nature, written with wit and charm, or Janaki Lenin's informative and entertaining wildlife stories will demonstrate how facts can make for great reading when they are placed in perspective and woven together well. There are any number of narrative histories that have been published in recent years, and teachers of social science can draw on these to supplement the often dry accounts in the prescribed texts. Non-fiction work might also delve deep into a lesser known aspect of culture, history, etc., and give you a completely different understanding of that field. I have often read works of non-fiction that were as exciting as any whodunit – in fact so much so that they were made into feature films! A recent example is *Killers of the Flower Moon*, a Pulitzer



Prize winning book by journalist David Gramm about how the FBI uncovered the murders among a native American tribe – this was made into an Oscar-nominated film with the same title.

There is also a need to get children to become critical readers, especially of non-fiction, as such books are an important input into how we think about the world. As teachers, we need to guide children through books that may be persuasive but problematic, driven by a motive to influence thinking in a certain direction by presenting facts selectively. Biographies, for instance, can be written in an overly positive way, cutting out all the details that may paint the person in a less than golden light. Across subjects, there will be books that are credible and well-researched, and even as the writer may have a point of view, they also ensure that the evidence is presented for their claims. So, it's important that children develop a sense of how to read non-fiction, because, even though these are stories, they are about the real world, the world we live in and want to learn about.

ACTIVITY: Ask the students to select a non-fiction book from an assigned list to be read over the course of a reasonable period (possibly a month). You could ask the library to collaborate by putting together a graded selection of books across topics – history, nature, science, biographies, social movements, etc. – from which the children can choose. Ask them to put together short reports that can then serve as reviews to be displayed on the library notice board or just in the classroom. Was the book interesting or boring? Why? What kind of information did the author use to tell the story? Was it believable or not? Why?

In school, for the most part, we tend to put literature into boxes, and almost always restrict our discussion of creative writing to works of fiction. As a result, children rarely think about other forms of storytelling, or consider that non-fiction too can be enjoyed as much, and appreciated as literature in its own right. Developing a taste for non-fiction can also help them become aware of how stories based on evidence and research can be told. Such an appreciation can hold them in good stead as they go on into careers that demand good writing and rigorous argument – and these could range from academic research to law to advocacy, just to name a few. Many people even today consider Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* to be as much a work of literature as it is a scientific argument. It captured the public imagination because he wrote it in a way that the non-specialist reader would understand it. As a teenager, I was introduced to the life and work of Sigmund Freud, Michaelangelo, and Van Gogh by the books of Irving Stone, whose storytelling mimicked fiction yet was based on fact.

The world of books is vast, and the pleasures unending, and these are multiplied when we broaden the scope of our reading. Exposing children to good non-fiction can give them a sense of a different sort of storytelling, and therefore a different avenue to learning about the world.

TP

A list to start with

- *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell
- *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer
- *My Husband and Other Animals* by Janaki Lenin
- *Every Creature Has a Story* by Janaki Lenin
- *The Puffin History of the World* (Parts 1 and 2) by Roshen Dalal
- *Fauja Singh Keeps Going* by Simran Jeet Singh
- *When Stars are Scattered* by Victoria Jamison and Omar Mohamed
- *The Royal Diaries* – biographies of female royal figures by various authors, published by Scholastic
- *I am Malala* by Malala Yousufzai and Christina Lamb
- *Blood, Bullets and Bones: the story of forensic science* by Bridget Heos

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